

Seeing Beneath and Beyond the Red:

Exploring the layers and folds in the Atlas I and Atlas II paintings of Penny Siopis through an understanding of affect theory and a pondering of the affective aesthetic experience.



A research report submitted in fulfillment of requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS IN HISTORY OF ART
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to be submitted by
July 24, 2023

An abstract painting featuring a prominent vertical stroke in the center. This stroke is composed of a dark, almost black, upper portion and a lighter, white-to-cream lower portion, with some red and orange tones bleeding into the white. The background is a complex, textured wash of colors including pinks, purples, blues, and greys. There are visible brushstrokes and some darker, more saturated areas, particularly on the right side where some blue and purple tones are more pronounced. The overall effect is one of depth and layered meaning, consistent with the title.

**Seeing Beneath
and Beyond
the Red**

Declaration

I, Mamelodi Dolly Marakalala (student number 1316906), declare that this research project is my own, unaided work. It has been submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in History of Art Coursework and Research Report at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at any other university.

July 24, 2023

Date

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'MAMELODI MARAKALALA', written over a dotted line.

Signature

Dedication

This degree is dedicated to my loving and supportive mother, Salminah ShadiShadi; to the women in my family and the women who continue to inspire me to achieve my dreams; and to all of the art that brought me here.

Bapedi pele!

Acknowledgements

I am thankful to the National Research Foundation (NRF) whose financial support made this research project a thriving possibility; to the University of the Witwatersrand's History of Art Department of the Wits School of Arts who provided the essential support in my academic journey – the coursework and writing seminars were truly incredible and helpful to my learning and writing experience; to my supervisor Greer Valley for the insights.

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Chapter 1: The Research Introduction

Background

First opened on October 22, 2020, and lasting until January 09, 2021, *In the Air* was an exhibition of Penny Siopis' artworks featuring two groups of paintings titled *Atlas I*, consisting of 25 pieces, and *Atlas II*, which consisted of 32 pieces. Although objects of art can be grounded on the subjective interpretations of the viewers who experience them, the exhibition was largely framed around the materiality of humanity and our relationship with the environment – not only as it is but also as we become conscious of the current state of our world and fearful of its collapse (Stevenson Gallery 2020).

At first glance, the paintings are collectively strikingly red with surrealist imagery that is said to blur the line between form and formlessness (Stevenson Gallery 2020). The idea of formless form or the materialisation of the formless appears to be Siopis' foremost artistic concern. The artworks can be categorised as objects of abstract art because although they show us scenes that are somewhat grounded in our own reality, they contain visual representations that do not entirely take the physical form of objects we become exposed to daily in the same way that representational paintings do. When we look at her historical paintings from the late 1980s in comparison to the paintings from the series of *Shame* and *Atlas*, we can make stark distinctions from the visual elements that inform us that the former of the paintings are representational whilst the latter two bodies of work are abstract/non-representational.

The *Atlas* paintings present subjects that can be described as bodily-like things, animalistic-looking beings, and nebulous blotches, rather than as the distinguishably portrayed bodies, animals, objects or scenes that we can perceive when we look at the still-life historical paintings, or any other paintings that can be described as representational for that matter. Siopis herself has said “each

[painting of the exhibition *In The Air*] seems like a scene – someone described seeing operas – but you can't tell what's going on. [There are] stains and swathes that have the feeling of water, wind, fire” (as cited in Stevenson Gallery 2020: n). “Presences peer from behind curtains, visors, tear barriers, touch other presences, distil into dots that read as eyes, beat their breasts, have tantrums, seem like grief, appear like love, ecstatic, tragic, she also said, in continuing to describe the visual essence of the paintings (Stevenson Gallery 2020: n). In conclusion of this research background, Siopis basically speaks about her work as having the capacity to be interpreted in different and vast ways. As such, out of these many interpretations, this research follows the reading that the *Atlas* paintings are capable of representing and symbolising emotional states of the mind.

Scope

This research pays much attention to Siopis' artistic interests, intentions, and artmaking process. It takes the position that whenever an object of art is created, the processes and emotions that went into creating have great significance on its value and in people viewing it. On the other hand, considering the notion of an aesthetic experience of objects of art, this research bears the understanding that different people from all walks of life have their rights to make their own interpretations in their encounters of the paintings. For instance, the reading of the paintings that this research is grounded upon has been an individual experience and somewhat of a personal journey for me as the author of this research. The first Siopis painting I encountered was *Melancholia* at the Johannesburg Art Gallery. Thereafter, I saw the paintings from *In The Air* and my very first thought of them, before my brain could find more words to describe them with, was how bright and red they were. In my attempt to think deeply about what they are and what they mean, I realised how emotionally bare they made me feel. I could see traces of my own emotions within them. I could see the sadness I have felt in my life and could not comprehend during the times I was feeling it, and now the *Atlas* paintings gave it colour and shape, for example. Therefore, I strongly believe that there is a group of art enthusiasts, sentimentalists, critics or scholars who could share, or at the very least agree with, this way of looking at this body of work.

Since this research is predicated on the notion that the *Atlas* paintings have an affective essence, I cannot help but wonder about the affective experiences of people with objects of art. I also cannot help what those imagined affective experiences can tell us about Siopis' *Atlas* paintings and their meaning in art history. Although it is a completely different form of art, I turn to film as a means to explain myself in this research scope, to give a better picture of the analyses and discussions to come in Chapter 3. Film seems to be a medium of art that has, time and time again, not only given the audience an affective experience but has also been capable of transmitting emotions and expressions to the viewers that are the same as those appearing on screen. For instance, people have experienced tears gathering in their eyes when they watched the protagonist of a particular movie crying or going through a human condition that most people would generally describe as sad and saddening. The word sad means an emotional state of the mind, while the word saddening speaks to a transmitting of said emotional state. However, I do acknowledge that the comparison to film is only as fair as the fact that a painting can only have as much visual presence as the still frame from single scene of a motion picture. There are elements to film that engage with more of our senses than even paintings viewed in sequence to each other. There are also other forms of art present in a film, including but not limited to music when it is used to enhance the feeling of events within a scene. On the other hand, the differences in these art forms should not entirely dismiss the idea that seeing particular emotions in art, even if it is paintings, can evoke a fraction of the same emotions from within us.

There are concepts in this research that I must expand on to make the chapters that more understandable. I consider affect to be the emotion that one feels on the inside in a single moment in time, following the perspective that "affects are [...] the molecular "beneath" the molar. The molecular understood here as life's, and art's, intensive quality, as the stuff that goes on beneath, beyond, even parallel to signification" (O'Sullivan 2001: 126). Hence I am exploring beneath and beyond the *Atlas* paintings, the details and meanings of which shall be properly explained in the methodology section of this chapter and demonstrated in Chapter 3. Furthermore, according to the philosopher Baruch Spinoza, affect can be defined as "as the effect another body, for example an art object, has upon my own body and my body's duration" (O'Sullivan 2001: 126). This simply means that the paintings of Penny Siopis can act upon individuals in an affective way. On the other hand, Spinoza's definition can also be applicable the other way around: wherein affect is one body

acting on another can and potentially supports the core idea of this research, which posits that the ideas and emotions that Siopis puts into making her art is her acting upon her art. As such, the art can end up showing us reflections of those ideas and emotions. Although the primary objective of this research is examining emotions as portrayed in the formal elements of Siopis' *Atlas* paintings, it is also important to secondarily consider the emotions of those who have encountered or are yet to encounter these paintings, as art does not exist in isolation from being seen and experienced.

This experience will be referred to in this research as an affective aesthetic experience, which I have differentiated from an aesthetic experience. The differentiation has been simply put in place because an aesthetic experience encompasses many facets such as (a) motivation, orientation, and attention, (b) cognition – accounting for semantics, semiotics, and imagination, and (c) affect, which is considered an “exceptional emotional experience” that “takes place where a strong feeling of merging by the observer with the object of aesthetic fascination is discernible” (van Heerden 2018: 6). Whereas, with this research, I am considering only the last aspect of the aesthetic experience. Even with this consideration, I do acknowledge that emotions, and specifically the emotional experiences of things, do not stand alone: it takes paying full attention and forming the meaning of things through one's cognition to have enough information for their mind and body to react. If one cannot understand what something means, how high is the chance that it will have a significant impact on them?

Within an affective aesthetic experience, are emotions and feelings. For the benefit of this research, I have to consider that there is some confusion as to whether emotions are feelings (Prinz 2005). In some instances, it will seem as if I have used them interchangeably. In other instances, it seems they are different aspects of the mind in relation to affect. Hence, I will be following Jesse Prinz's argument that “emotions are feelings whenever emotions are felt” (2005: 12). Prinz (2005) paints a detailed image of what is meant by this idea. Firstly, whenever there is an event or condition of reality, there is a response to or an experience of it that is both psychological and physiological; that is when our minds and bodies get emotions. Secondly, when we perceive of these psychological and physiological changes, that is when we have feelings. In summary, as per the idea of this research: when I enter an art gallery, my mind and body will then unconsciously enter an emotional state because of my encounter with objects of art. Potentially, I may come to be

conscious of this emotional state and begin to have certain feelings. In the case that the emotional state remains unconscious to me, I have not felt anything.

Rationale

Given how I have presented the background and scope, I will elucidate why exploring the nature of Siopis' paintings through the lens of affect can be considered greatly important, especially in the history of art and the topic of the aesthetic experience. Jennifer Fisher (2006) once claimed that in art history, more emphasis is placed on the application of art historical theory into the presentation of art than on the ambience, arrangement, and scenes of the exhibition space. Throughout a relatively distant history, people have approached art in many different ways. Paintings have been perceived and appreciated because they have an economically measurable value, they can be used for decoration, they are valuable simply because that is their essence, and there are pleasures to be gained from encountering and engaging with them (Berman 1972). The four aforementioned approaches speak to an art world and market of people that appreciate, engage with, and purchase paintings for various of their personal motivations. Personal motivations that we can all agree are grounded on the emotions different people can have when they interact with objects. As we know, people buy things and put them into their homes or important places because they were moved internally to do so.

The Artsy Editorial Team (2020) spoke with several art collectors from different cities of the world on the work that they collected that year and the reasons behind those acquisitions, which reveal that personal motivations can be driven by emotional inclinations. Makgati Molebatsi acquired David Mbele's *Untitled* painting from either the 60s or 70s depicting children seemingly in a classroom, some reading their books and others holding their slates. "During the lockdown, when everything was closed and schooling was remote, I wondered about the children from township schools who had no means nor access to remote learning. I thought back to my early schooling in black townships during apartheid," she said (as cited by the Artsy Editorial Team 2020: n). The sentiment in Molebatsi's statement reveals she was persuaded by emotions of nostalgia and empathy. The lines that make up the subjects of this painting as well as the colour composition of

red and grey on the canvas are presenting a retro style image, which constitute some portrayal of that nostalgia. I would say a painting of this sort was meant to give the older generation an emotional reminder of their days as pupils in apartheid South Africa and to give younger generations a visual depiction of the stories they have heard from their parents and grandparents. As one can see, emotions play a significant role in our engagements with objects of art.

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I consider an affective approach not more remarkable than other ways of engaging with art but rather remarkable in its own sense. Moreover, different approaches to art are not to be taken as separate ideologies; they can be intermingled. Art can be considered to have economic value to a collector because there are pleasures to be gained from it. Also, someone can appreciate a piece of

art for its essence and acquire it because that means to them that it is valuable to have as decoration. Jennifer Fisher's (2006) '*Exhibitionary Affect*' paper was a good start to the further development of my reading of Siopis' paintings. *Atlas*, in its expanded version, made another appearance in an exhibition that ran from March 25 to May 5, 2023, titled *Feral Figurations*. Because I got the opportunity to have an experience of the paintings themselves in an exhibitionary context with this study in mind, I have a real-world account of the presence, immersion, and engagement with the energies of the paintings that Fisher's paper speaks on. Once one looks at the scenes of the paintings and goes through the story that each *Atlas* paper offers as I did at Stevenson's Johannesburg Gallery, the formal elements do come alive in the aesthetic sense and the subjects can represent different emotions.

This study's reading of Siopis' artworks should be taken as another viable way to consider the+ affective sphere that can be formed in the appreciation of art. In the spirit of Teresa Brennan's "transmission of affect" (Fisher 2006: 28), it is significant to explore not simply the affective atmosphere in an art environment, but to also explore the affective sphere as it relates to the objects of art themselves, specifically their formal elements. A study of this nature will help us understand the place of art history and visual study in contemporary times much better, especially considering that art can be as a medium of understanding the place of our emotions in the world, which underlie every bit of our behaviours and interactions.

Siopis presents an interesting case as an artist renowned for her historical, representational still-life paintings that we consider to be larger than life, not only in size but in the way they confronted the sociopolitical landscape of apartheid South Africa. She has since shifted to creating abstract paintings that have an inward focus and depict scenes that confront elements and conflicts of the self and emotions. There is much said regarding Siopis' historical representational still-life paintings in art history discussions (Herbst 1995; Coombes 1997; Young 2015; Bronner 2019). Although, as much as we can generally accept that objects of art are essentially emotive and are meant to evoke very specific emotional states, the paintings have mostly been approached from perspectives that engage more with themes of race, gender, and other such sociopolitical or political contexts. These discussions rarely directly considered the artworks from a perspective or theory of affect. Moreover, the viewers' possible affective aesthetic experiences of the paintings,

which is the gap I intend on addressing because objects of art have always been meant to be seen and experienced.

Given the context of the historical paintings, it is understandable that they were discussed largely from perspectives of the social sciences rather than psychological. However, we must not neglect the insights we could obtain from recognising emotions within paintings and, in turn, giving human emotions a statement and history of their own. The focus of this research is the paintings she has produced in recent times that need to be explored and entered in the existing discussions about Siopis' work. The *Atlas* paintings specifically engage with the idea of form and formlessness, especially as it concerns the human psyche in relation to the human environment. Firstly, emotions both have form (i.e., they can be expressed through physiological means such as tears, laughter, reddening, swelling, etc.) and are formless (i.e., they are felt, they cannot be seen or touched). Secondly, people are emotional beings. Because these paintings specifically engage with inwardness, I saw it as imperative to bring to the fore more knowledge on our emotional experiences in the world, as much as it has been important for the historical paintings to be discussed around their major themes of race, gender, and so forth in an apartheid or post-apartheid context. It should be noted that this research will be contributing to not only art history, but also in terms of the psychology and philosophy of aesthetics and emotions.

Research Question and Sub-Questions

What emotions are portrayed in Penny Siopis' *Atlas I* and *Atlas II* paintings and what connections can we make from these emotional portrayals to affect theory and the aesthetic experience?

Sub-questions

1. What emotions are portrayed in the *Atlas I* and *Atlas II* paintings of Penny Siopis as per a formal analysis of them?
2. What can the emotions portrayed in *Atlas I* and *Atlas II* paintings tell us about the ways in which art can be emotionally experienced?

3. What can be learnt about affect theory and an affective aesthetic experience from the interpretation that Penny Siopis' *Atlas* paintings are portraying various emotions?

Aims

The primary aim of this research is to explore the different emotions portrayed in the *Atlas I* and *Atlas II* paintings, which I believe to have been represented through formal elements such as the shapes, colours, and symbols shown through the figures and scenes that make up the content of the paintings. To explore Siopis' work as a space for becoming in-touch with the psychological vulnerability of humanity and to uncover what discussions can be formulated about people's interactions with and experiences of art from an understanding of the emotions in *Atlas*. Furthermore, to apply affect theory in a meaningful way, from which further knowledge can be obtained about the concept of aesthetics and the psycho-phenomenon of the aesthetic experience. Finally, to provide a background into Siopis' work as an artist by including the two prominent still-life paintings and selected paintings from the *Shame* series in my study, to make a nuanced contribution to the literature on her objects and artistic practice.

Theoretical Framework

This research will be grounded in affect theory. However, the theory of affect is a vast one to engage with because there have been hordes of discussion and debate on what it is and how it can apply to our world, yet without any agreed upon conceptualisation. In Chapter 2, which is a review of the literature most relevant to this study, the literature on affect theory will be covered to also provide thorough reason as to the establishment of the theoretical framework of this research. In a way, the many contributions to the theorisation of affect function the very same as our relationship with art. This is because every piece of art we encounter opens only the doors of subjectivity, in which many people are allowed their own ideas on what the object is or what it means. Within these subjective understandings, I will be presenting an affect theory that applies particularly to what this study aims to explore.

Margaret Wetherell (2012) introduces a theorisation of affect that aligns with the reading of Siopis' *Atlas* paintings. In the introduction chapter of her book *Affect and Emotion: A New Social Science Understanding*, Wetherell (2012: 12) presents a concept that describes affect as a “flowing activity” that “is always ‘turned on’ and ‘simmering’, moving along”. Furthermore, “the ongoing flow of affective activity can take shape as a particular kind of affective performance, episode or occasion, as in, for instance, a child’s tantrum, a self-aggrandising narrative, or a bounded experience of joy” (Wetherell 2012: 12).

The describing of affect as a performance reminds me of photographs in the *Material Acts* book (Perryer 2018) wherein Siopis can be seen splashing paint, pouring glue, and spraying another liquid substance onto the canvas; her body in ongoing movement and her hands engaged in her art practice, with traces of the process visible on her fingers. The reference to affect being an episode or occasion make me strongly believe that it is a phenomenon or moment that can be seen and, therefore, captured, the same way “a child’s tantrum” can be photographed, a “self-aggrandising narrative” can be written, or “a bounded experience of joy” can be turned into a pop song. In this case, I can comfortably understand the scenes in the *Atlas* paintings to be representations of affect as humans have performed it, visualisations of affect as episodes or occasions that were once felt, witnessed, or simply imagined by the artist.

In Chapter Four of her book – the point at which she engages with affect as a phenomenon that can be “situated” in a particular moment in time – Wetherell (2012: 78) states: “my interest is in moments of affective action where something distinct and recognisable happens”. Given that this research will be exploring what different emotions appear, or can be seen at least, in a single *Atlas* painting through formal assessment, making affect situated in objects of art the same other phenomena often is (including Siopis’ artistic take on apartheid South Africa in the historical, still-life paintings), then the statement on her interest perfectly supports this research.

One might question how this research plans on demonstrating the aforementioned elements of affect as a phenomenon, or rather psycho-phenomenon, that is an activity that flows

continuously within us and finds a place being situated in different moments of life. The answer lies in our reliance on linguistic, physiological, and behavioural communication for anyone to begin to speak on an emotional performance, episode, or occasion in the first place (Fayn et al. 2017). As an example, words need to be said for us to understand that someone is having a feeling and what that feeling is; tears need to be falling from the face of a figure or liquid needs to be trailing from a surface for one to determine crying, which is often a display of sadness; or someone needs to act out the activity in their mind, carrying a weight of their emotions or slamming a door shut.

In addition to learning about Siopis' paintings themselves in relation to their portrayals of affect (as it can be seen as a "flowing activity"; as it can be seen situated in her artistic representations of interactional existence, emotional accounts/recounts, and moments in time), this research will also be considering the idea of an affective aesthetic experience. As philosopher John Dewey once suggested to the world, art cannot be separated from humanness and human experience: the artist creates an object of art from their own experiences in life, also applying the emotions that accompanied the specific instances that they are putting on a canvas; the object becomes a medium through which these emotions can be experienced, never becoming a thing that exists on its own; the audience becomes a vessel through which the object can have its own existence, relating to its subjects and feeling its scenes (Goldblatt 2006).

Of course, this research is about exploring beneath the red of the *Atlas* series (i.e., the formal elements of the paintings). However, I also find great importance in exploring beyond the red (i.e., the life these paintings took on when they entered a public sphere, as per Dewey's reasoning. In their perception of the object and making of meanings in the aesthetic interaction, viewers can have emotional experiences that exceed typical hedonic judgments such as interest/disinterest, pleasure/displeasure, and attraction/aversion (Schindler et al. 2017). The following notion of affect can be one of the ways in which viewers can come to having emotional experiences of objects of art. When looking at Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic perspective of affect, we realise that there are depths to people's relationships with objects in the world. Konstantina Georgelou's reading of Kristeva's abjection brings forth a theory of

abjection that proposes a radical way of seeing and, therefore, understating and feeling things that shifts away from “standardized conceptions and perceptions of how things are, how they should or could be” (2014: 25).

Kristeva says that we are subjects of reality and we tend to lose our subjecthood in the face of objects when we stop seeing the separation between ourselves and the objects at some point of an interaction with them, which explains how the sight of a corpse can bring us at the mercy of our own materiality and mortality (Georgelou 2014). As such, hypothetically, seeing the *Atlas* paintings can enable viewers to be conscious of their own emotional standing with the contents and themes presented in the art. Given Dewey’s ideas on the aesthetic experience above, then I strongly believe Kristeva’s abjection is relevant in exploring the affective intricacies and transmissional elements that come with such an emotive experience as engaging in art.

Methodology and Methods

This research will be employing a qualitative conceptual research framework, which is a research method that attempts to understand a phenomenon by way of exploring a theory that best applies to it. Because this research is following an object reading that states that the abstract paintings of Penny Siopis, particularly from the *Atlas* series, have all portrayed specific emotions and pondering on the aesthetic experiences they are capable of evoking from viewers, I will be exploring affect theory. Furthermore, this research is expected to yield qualitative and nuanced results. As such, this method can be trusted to produce this art historical knowledge to be discovered. The methodological parameters of this study include presenting theorisations of affect theory and applying them in the art historical/visual studies context by demonstrating what emotions are portrayed in the paintings, what meanings can then be attached to these portrayals, in what ways does this then affect the experiences to be had in viewing these paintings, and what there is to be said about the personal and emotional connections people have built with objects of art.

A qualitative research methodology involves in-depth perspectives in the investigation of a particular research topic and relies largely on language (i.e., textual information over numerical data) to contribute to diverse knowledge systems in many disciplines of the humanities (Ndimande 2012). Because I will be working with information that will not be quantified, a qualitative study is most suitable in this undertaking. The final paper of this research project is intended to be documented information about a significant body of work that contributes to knowledge in art history. As such, I will be employing a conceptual framework to ensure that I “identify and articulate the nuances” of the objects of art and concepts being explored without the heavy reliance on “one fixed definition or set of prescriptions (Kosciejew 2018). This is an adequate framework given that the research topic is grounded in my subjective reading of Penny Siopis’ paintings, places significant consideration in the subjectivity of art and the aesthetic experience, and focuses on publicly available accounts of people’s experiences with art.

The step-by-step use of this research method will include an analysis of formal elements of the *Atlas* paintings, especially the shapes and colours within the paintings, and determining the kinds of emotions they portray. Siopis’ historical paintings and the *Shame* series will also be analysed to show that her artistic background and practice aligns with effect theory and this research endeavor. This will be the first step of my application of the qualitative conceptual method. Other media, including the lyrics of a song, a quote from a novel, and a scene from a movie, will be incorporated to properly articulate the emotions portrayed in the paintings. The second step is in exploring the concept of an affective aesthetic experience and will involve presenting and discussing the possibilities of different people’s thoughts and feelings towards Siopis’ paintings. I will be finding information from the digital sphere, from the existing research output that is the book of James Elkins (2005), from an empirical study that was conducted by Slobodon Markovic (2010), and a contextualised discussion of emotion and emotional experiences. Hence the method being employed for this research is mainly theoretically-based. A qualitative and conceptual approach will allow me to thoroughly navigate this exploration to present a final and coherent contribution to the knowledge economy of the arts.

Chapter 2: The Literature and Theory

Art in the Space of Perception and Emotion

According to David Perkins (1988), art can be viewed from at least two standpoints: from the position of the maker of the object of art or as the beholder. The artist makes paintings from their position, for various reasons that can range from personal and psychological expressions to professional intentions and interests – among various other reasons that have been expressed in the thousands of interviews by artists as to why they created their paintings. Yet, separate from their personal or artistic motivations, the paintings eventually become their own entity, which is then encountered by the viewer who also has their individual perspectives and interests that are personal to them, along with their volitions and memories of past life experiences.

Although we come from a history of the universalisation of distinct human experiences, where the likes of Perkins (1988) suggest that art fundamentally exists as something to be bothered with in the daily continuation of social and cultural life, and to be bothered with well. However, we can acknowledge the countless or even nameless subjective accounts that can be possible when individuals enter an interactional space with a work of art. We can claim that ‘bothering with art’ is legitimate, yet ‘bothering with art well’ is a myth. Hence, I have also claimed (for this research) that an encounter with a work of art can constitute the locating of one’s inner self. If this inner self can be located, how it is located, and what that means can also be a largely different (affective) aesthetic experience for two or more people viewing a single painting, a collection of paintings, or generally being in an art space.

Because objects considered art and often chosen to be displayed in institutions of art are expected to have compelling effects on the human senses, the interactions people get to have with the likes of Penny Siopis' paintings involve encoding, anticipating, projecting, pondering, conceiving – constructions and operations “on and through webs of relationships” (Perkins 1988: 118). There is very little room to dispute that art “inevitably and profoundly [encompasses] the application of our apparatus of understanding in various modes and directions” (Perkins 1988: 118). Some human experience theorists have claimed that the locating of the inner self can happen when a person reaches a satisfactory point of understanding an object of art, they typically enter a state which Edward Bullough referred to as “psychical distance”, which Abraham Maslow labeled the “peak experience”, and a psychological phenomenon that Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi called a “flow state” (Pelowski & Akiba 2011: 82). Henceforth, I theorize that it is from the modes of understanding the object from within one's self and for the self that the viewer is able to achieve the distance of the psyche, experience peak, or state of flow; that the viewer of the object is able to see the object for what it is, yet essentially for what it is to them specifically.

Although the aforementioned mental states of experience may sound universalised and limiting to some, they simply give a sensible name and explanation to the mental spheres that many of us are taken to when entering an art gallery or museum, which is generally envisioned as being ‘lost in the moment’. Furthermore, I realise that instances of the affective aesthetic experience will be different for different individuals. For some people, reaching some sort of distance, peak, or flow of experience would be a foreign concept. Or, we could say that the process – as such with other processes of the mind – happens at incomprehensible speeds that we cannot simply measure and deduce exactly how they come to be.

Based on a study conducted by Gregory Feist and Tara Brady (2004), which primarily questioned the preferences of people towards representational versus abstract paintings, it is not enough to know what the case is but it is equally important to also understand why the case is. We cannot simply accept that an affective experience of works of art is possible, but we must also attempt to understand why it takes place if and/or when it takes place. With the use of evolutionary theory, we can initially deduce that it is through human instincts to survive and

thrive that people are more likely to have more interest in art, especially when it is very familiar to them (Feist & Brady 2004). This means that people's response to art heightens in accordance with whichever form of art they were able to project their perspectives and ideologies and to which they relate their lives and feelings.

The data of this study (Feist & Brady 2004) revealed that whether people take to a specific style of art and if they have a positive or negative experience of it is dependent on various factors – it could be instincts or personality traits, but it could also be cultural backgrounds, religious beliefs, or other. This gives us much to consider when exploring the hypothetical idea that people can potentially have a strong emotional response to the *Atlas* paintings of Penny Siopis. The reality is that while one viewer could be brought into tears because of the portrayal of anxieties and sadness in the paintings, another person could cry because they are moved by the beauty of the paintings and the artist's use of red. On the other hand, while some could simply appreciate the paintings, others might not care for them. The possible aesthetic responses and aesthetic relationships from the interaction between viewers and objects are so numerous and convoluted that they cannot be compartmentalised and distinctly defined, nor could they have true definitions because of the subjectivity element.

According to Brigitte Dekeyzer (2022), there are at least four facets to the experience of art. The experience is initiated by the senses (e.g., watching a painting, touching an interactive installation, or hearing the sound from a film). It is carried out by the processes of interpretation (e.g., coming to understand the meanings of the sensory information). It can be manipulated through the positioning of the body (e.g., moving around the object to different positions in the gallery space). It finally creates momentary sparks in cognition and emotion that are also expressed by the body (that is, with body language, facial expressions, and exclamations, and words). All these facets intermingle and can also build towards the viewer's experience to some extent.

In 2022, I had to complete an object physical examination for an academic project on the object biography of Regina Buthelezi's tapestry, *Once There Came a Terrible Beast* (1968), utilizing my senses and focusing on the artwork's physical appeal and particularities. Because of its

vibrant gold colour and large size, I could realise the differences in the shades and tints of the tapestry, with each movement around the tapestry – depending on whether I was moving closer to or further from it. I could experience the differences in the visual story: the beast in the story held much lesser weight as I got further away, and the tapestry became smaller. The minimalised tragedy meant the feelings of sadness and anger I had towards the actions of the beast and the agony of the subjects affected by the beast slowly became distant. Therefore, in addition to considering the sensory element of the viewers of *Atlas*, it should also be considered that the series comes as a collective grouped into 25 and 32 paper paintings, each one quite smaller in size. It is possible that there is no affective response to these paintings in particular (i.e., any feelings, no matter how small) because they are small, which is also a factor that could possibly diminish their impact on people's emotions.

Slobodon Markovic (2010) presents three ways in which the aesthetic experience presents itself. The first is that audiences have a characteristic with which they are immensely motivated in engaging with art and dedicate their full attention, that they reach a mental state where they lose a conscious grasp of other objects or occurrences in the same locale, including a sense of time and themselves. As exemplified in the previous section, this is a feeling generally articulated as being lost in the moment. The second is when people apply a semantic formation and imagination, such that the objects are distanced from our own reality and gain a world of our mental making. For example, when the white lines in Moshekwa Langa's *Dawn & Themba* (2015) are seen less as white lines and become more associated with fences. Finally, the viewer experiences a piece of art when they have strong and distinguishable feelings towards it from a sense of unity between themselves and the art before them. Given how it is an expected phenomenon that the experience of art is accompanied by emotion, some researchers claim that they – referred to as aesthetic emotions – are distinct from emotions formed through ordinary experiences (Nadal & Skov 2013).

Unlike the emotions from everyday experiences, which are labelled utilitarian emotions, aesthetic emotions do not stem from “concerns with the relevance of a perception to [a person's] bodily needs, [their] social values, or [their] current goals or plans, nor with how well [they] can cope with the situation. Instead, aesthetic emotions are one where the

appreciation of the intrinsic qualities of a piece of visual art or a piece of music is of paramount importance” (Scherer 2004, as quoted by Nadal & Skov 2013: 7). It is possible that, like the lines in Langa’s paintings from the *Ellipses* exhibition (2016) and viewers’ (potential) ‘fences’, Siopis’ *Atlas* paintings can be engaged with as emotions or as worlds of emotions.

Penny Siopis in South African Art History

Penny Siopis has been an artist for a very long period of time and her art has seen many of the turns of the South African art world, as she has shifted with them, through her films, installations, the cake sculptures, the historical still-life paintings, the *Shame* series, and now the *Atlas* series. As such, it is to be expected that there has been a variety of discussions of her and her work spanning at least four decades. According to Anne Coombes (1997: 110), Siopis has “always” been the artist who engages with very “critical and controversial” societal and political issues such as gender, race, and ethnicity. Throughout history and art history, artists have always had a strong need to address and/or challenge the times in which they lived and worked. Therefore, having lived in apartheid South African, she asserted herself as an artist by engaging the states and shifts of that system and the social and cultural dynamics surrounding it.

In her works, prior to the *Shame* and *Atlas* series, she acknowledges that there are layers and folds to these dynamics and she does this by addressing them through a feminist lens, by presenting the female bodies (of different races and ethnicities) as situated within political and social systems that publicly placed them in their positions. A weaving of Kristeva’s abjection theory of affect into her work – through art historical mediums (e.g. the use of flesh-coloured pigments and thick application of the paint) and visual language (e.g. content and composition that portrays women like Sarah Baartman) – is one of the ways in which she challenged the spheres in which the female body resided that “bolstered ideologies that were racist and sexist” (Schmahmann 2017: 209), such as non-male, scientific, this or that, black or white, restricted or fetishised, and more.

Another way in which she challenged these spheres is through her artistic presentations of the economic, political, and social positions of Black women in apartheid South Africa. As Brenda Schmahmann (2017: 197) said, “Siopis’ works explore a history of disciplining the female body through legislative acts and political structures that bolstered the White authority in South Africa”. Furthermore, as Irene Bronner (2019: 31) said, “Since the 1980s, Penny Siopis’ work has been seminal in South Africa in its engagement with issues of gender, race relations, representation, sexuality, memory, and belonging”. Looking at a particular work of art, “*Tula Tula* (1994) is a mixed-media portrait that draws its source from a photograph of the artist’s young brother seated on the lap of his black ‘nanny’ in the early 1960s, evidence of a complex surrogacy relationship between black ‘nannies’ and white children that was photographed as uncontroversially quotidian in apartheid-era South Africa (Bronner 2019: 31). Schmahmann (2017) uses the word “bolstered”, the dictionary definition of which is to provide (in this case, a system) with its strongest foundations so that it is upheld to the highest of its degrees. Because the system weaponised identities to maintain governance, it was crucial that the art world of that time to address and challenge those foundations just as the art world of this time addresses many of today’s issues, which often include the psychological elements that result from existing in current social dynamics.

Siopis’ art practice also took its turn once it was established that the apartheid era had reached its inevitable. “The decade [of the 90s] thusly saw a stream of collective efforts to both unearth the past and envision the future, marking a time of great cultural, artistic, political, and discursive transition (Young 2015: 46). Allison Young’s paper (2015: 48) “explores migration as both theme and operation in Siopis’ art, as well as the archaeologies of space and time that characterize her work in the post-apartheid period, with focus on two installations created in the year 1997. *My Lovely Day* and *Reconnaissance* (1900-1997) both narrate the stories of three generations of women in Siopis’ family, displacing onto found images and objects the auratic resonances of memory and post-memory”. *The Second Johannesburg Biennale* (1997) that Siopis was responding to under the themes of “migration, materiality, and time” shows us that the art world shifts with societal shifts. Post-apartheid South Africa birthed a nation that had much to look forward to but also very much to deal with and work through in terms of the memories that people hold of that time and the collective memories of society that are to echo

throughout future narratives and future histories. In that future, familial, individual, and emotional spheres are at the core and fore of societal discourse. As such, her focusing on the dynamics of her own family marked the beginning of a long body of work centered on both self and emotion (i.e., concepts and theories of being and feeling).

In 2000, Siopis started exploring *Shame* in society, from a Freudian lens, that culminated to a large body of work of small mixed-media paintings. This series is known for the ways in which she blurs the lines between form and formlessness and for their portrayal of the emotion shame through elements that can be perceived as abject, because the colour red and the textures of fluid or flesh in these paintings can remind us of blood or an open wound. According to Griselda Pollock (2006: 18), “Penny Siopis took up this ‘atmospheric’ enigma, linking sexuality and shame in the context of a political history of extreme violation of human rights and dignity in apartheid South Africa”. This tells us that Siopis understands people, on both an individual and collective level, are not separate from their society and its history. We may be living in post-apartheid South Africa but we tend to come across the social/socio-political marks of apartheid because many of our ideologies, discourses, and lived experiences were informed by that time.

Much of engaging with Siopis’ engagement with shame involves attempting to understand what this emotion is and how it presents itself. Pollock (2006:8-9) asks questions very important questions around how far and for how long shame can have a hold on us: “Can we die of shame?”; what it means to feel shame: “Is shame what we feel before our very humanity – neediness, physicality, vulnerability?”; and how it is situated: “Is shame external: the censorious gaze of others upon us regulating our social, sexual behaviors? Or is it deeper, internal: akin almost to trauma?” In Sarah Nuttall’s paper (2011: 291), which confirms Siopis as the artist whose art practice is centered around the materialisation and visualisation of emotion, Penny Siopis fastens shame to terms such as “intimacy and violence”, betrayal of the self, “a state of disgrace”, and “a feeling of losing one’s dignity in full view of others”. It involves ‘me’ versus ‘them’ and ‘my privacy’ versus ‘their watchful and judgemental eyes’. Siopis highlights this dynamic by adding sexuality and bringing womanhood into the conversation, because these concepts remain at the root of her art. In society, sex and the female

anatomy are most private and deemed unspeakable, yet have been historically, heavily scrutinised by all the sciences and in layman contexts. What we are most likely to learn from Siopis' work is that social dynamics are intermingled with affect no matter how external they appear.

When Siopis had a retrospective exhibition titled *Time and Again* (2014) featuring selected paintings of her life's work and exploring "intimate narratives that speak of personal and collective history, trauma, shame, and loss" (Perrée 2015: n), that in itself may have created a space of emotional retrospection for the people who came to visit. Manuela Karin Knaut-Bührmann (2017) has also touched on the idea of hers and Siopis' installation art having the capacity to give a single viewer an experience that engages their multiple senses wherein they end up being emotionally responded and emotionally invested. When Siopis revisited her Shame series for the exhibition titled *Shadow Shame Again* (2021), her audiences were visually confronted by the striking imagery with the idea of detailing and understanding, revisiting, and tending to shame itself and its presence in their individual lives and communities (Gqola 2021). Much of the literature has not yet delved deeply into the works from *In The Air* (2020-2021) exhibition and affective experience of Siopis' art, nor the relationship between the formal elements and themes within her paintings and the emotions of the viewers that encounter and engage with them within that sphere of an affective experience.

Locating Affect in the Theory

According to Arel (2016: 8), "the study of affect represents an attempt to account for the ways in which individuals come to know the world, theorizing not only the body but also its capacity to act and be acted upon. Accounting for the very material engagements that inform human life, affect theorists acknowledge that people learn bodily". This claim attests to the notion that we must first know the world we inhabit before not only existing in it but also having experiences within it. A notion that Jean-Luc Jucker, Justin Barrett, and Rafael Wlodarski (2014: 150) extend towards objects existing in the world when stating that: because people acting upon things or things acting upon people is a natural and inevitable occurrence, there

are systems of the mind that come into play wherein “just looking at an object triggers speculation about how it might be reached, grasped, and acted upon” and “children and adults approach artifacts partly in terms of their potential functions”.

We, in the art world, have already passed the judgment that objects of art have no particular function in as much as aesthetic teapots or vases do. Then, presumably, most of us visit art exhibitions and gravitate toward art only because of how it looks, the aspects of society it addresses, what meanings we can attach to its content, and how all of these can make us feel. Because of that judgment and learned practice, we generally tend to enter a space of the art world as having already accepted that our minds are to be challenged and our emotions awakened and confronted. The extent of the awakening or confronting is still up for question. In a study exploring whether the differentiation of emotion in the context of an aesthetic experience (i.e., the ability to understand, label, and describe one’s own emotion when looking at art) was associated with curiosity in and knowledge of the arts, Kirill Fayn and fellow researchers (2017) mentioned that affect can be measured through the words people choose to express how they are feeling as well as through their physiological and behavioural responses. That is, someone would need to say that they find a painting disturbing or reveal a ghastly smile for others to know that they are disturbed by it.

There are still layers to consider that are involved in the emotional experience of art, in addition to and in convolution with the above conceptualisation of how affect is presented and expressed through words as well as the face and body, and in turn measured by art historians. Firstly, every subjective encounter with a painting involves the viewer making assessments and deriving meanings grounded on their knowledge and experience, that result in specific feelings towards it (Li & Chen 2009). For example, when a person associates the scenes that they witness in a painting with the events or conditions they have experienced at some point in their life. Because those life events and conditions brought on what can be said to be the appropriate emotions, seeing them again through a medium that was evidently meant to elicit certain emotions can bring them to the surface once more.

Secondly, the viewer encountering and engaging with a painting stands to have emotions that far more complex than merely having a hedonic interest or disinterest or being moved to (basic) emotions such as sadness or happiness, just to name a few; rather, there are nuances such as despair, gloom, loneliness, or nostalgia in the bracket of ‘being sad’ and excitement, enthusiasm, thrill, joy, gladness, or serenity in the bracket of ‘being happy’ - the complexities extend to the whole ranges of other emotions there normally are in the aesthetic experience (Schindler et al. 2017). Therefore, an affective aesthetic experience can be far more than about how beautiful (i.e., aesthetically pleasing) or ugly (i.e., aesthetically displeasing) a painting is, becoming more about how the sense of loneliness from the painting’s portrayal of isolation has moved the viewer to feel anxious.

Thirdly, affect can be considered under conditions of mimesis, wherein “mimetic communication can be conceived as an example of synchrony, as a pervasive ‘sharing of form’ that seems to be ‘the fundamental communicational principle running through all levels of behaviour’, through both human and animal bodies, and connected to other rhythmic processes in the [experience of an artwork]” (Gibbs 2010: 187). That is to say, the concept of being lost in the moment or finding a piece of art most appealing to us is able to bring forth re-enactments. Life imitating art is at times spontaneous (e.g., if someone were to widen their eyes when they came across one of the googly-eyed paintings from Siopis’ *Shame* series). Sometimes, it happens long after the fact (e.g., if someone were to wear a red dress or painted themselves red for social media in imitation of a figure from a *Shame* painting, or if there was a play or film that re-enacted a scene from a *Shame* painting). Gibbs (2010) also makes note of the contagiousness of emotion, in which one can be evoked by or reminded of a painting and then moved to the point of adopting the expressions or poses, appearing like the figures, reliving the scenes they experienced from an object. It can indeed, in addition to other facets of art appreciation, be an innovative and important way to think about, be one with, and act out our emotional connections (Gibbs 2010) towards the objects that surround us when we enter art spaces.

The theoretical framework that this research is grounded upon is intended to be employed in clear recognition of the idea that the *Atlas* paintings depict a variety of different emotions (i.e.,

visual portrayals of affect) and that a viewer engaging with them could potentially experience the emotions that are portrayed (i.e., affective experience). There have been countless theorisations of affect. One of the important elements has been the locale of affect. That is, answering questions such as: what is affect as this ‘thing’ that is part of our minds? Where is it located and how does it travel given that we understand that it is, or rather it happens, within us? Wetherell (2012) presents theories that offer some enlightenment in the locating of affect. Some theorists argue that it does not merely occupy psychological space, it is also psychosocial. That is to say, as stated in the first paragraph of this section of the literature review, emotions do not begin and end in the mind, they occur and are felt always in relation to others, objects, or events of the environment. Some have stated that it extends its locale physiologically, traveling to the mind and throughout the body as it takes place, from the thumping heart to a rising of the blood. If it can be located in all of these fields that make up being human, then affect has the capacity to be visually represented in various art forms that portray humanity, including paintings. In the words of Dewey, “what is called the magic of the artist resides in his ability to transfer [values and forces of life] from one field of experience to another” (Goldblatt 2006: 18) – from a lived reality to the canvas. Because of the interactivity of emotion, affect is also transferred into the aesthetic experience. Furthermore, “as viewers relate personally to emotional or imaginative states, myriad associations emerge, an idea supported by Jerome Bruner on the power of affective experience” (Goldblatt 2006: 23). Meaning that we can expect a number of affective possibilities with every object of art encountered.

The vast conceptualisations of affect in the literature, as presented in the previous paragraphs, are indicative of the complex nature of the inner world, which encompasses the sphere of affect, the experience of emotion, and the expression of different feelings. Therefore, the psychological perspective of holism (e.g., engaging with the individual as well as culture, history, technology and so on) needs to be considered in for a nuanced exploration of the affect activity in the experience of the paintings of Siopis. Affect is not simply a phenomenon that is beyond us. It has psychological and neurological implications through the ways in which emotions form and are experienced, it regards social and cultural matters through the ways different people acquired the knowledge to find emotional value in particular events and

objects, it involves biological/biochemical/physiological elements through how every feeling is expressed through a person's body. This multiplicity is much emphasized in the literature because it is a given, as explained by Peter Zachar (2014), the human mind functions in such a way that affect does not exist in isolation from other cognitive processes such as the senses, attention, thought, or memory. In layman's terms, people think because they saw; because they paid attention, they feel; and what they felt is captured by memory. Emotions are entwined with every part of this network.

Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic perspective propositions the act of seeing things in a radical fashion so that an affective engagement with the object is not about what the object is and what it depicts, but rather about what an object has the potential of becoming (Georgelou 2014: 25), especially through the projections and interpretations of the viewer. Apparently, we are the subjects of reality and tend to lose our subjecthood in the face of objects, whereby we stop seeing the separation between ourselves and objects of art at some point in the aesthetic interaction with them, which explains how the sight of a corpse brings us at the mercy of our own materiality and mortality (Georgelou 2014). As such, the speculation becomes that the portrait of a saddened face can then become a confrontation of our melancholic human nature and probably bring us to feel the negative emotions that attest to this nature. One might argue that the concept of seeing red and feeling red as a result is too simplistic to hold significant ground for this research – especially with the presentations that have been made thus far regarding the subjectivity of the aesthetic experience and the complexities of people's emotions even outside/before the context of the art world. Considering subjectivity alone, not all (if any) viewers of the *Atlas* paintings will come to feel the anxieties that they are confronted with through the scenes or subjects illustrated in the paintings, or through themes that were presented in the exhibition for the paintings, or even the Siopis' emotive painting process and artistic interests.

Chapter 3: Beneath and Beyond Atlas

Melancholia and Patience on a Monument

According to her biography, Siopis began her career in the late 70s, producing her two prominent historical still-life works, *Melancholia*, in 1986 and, *Patience on a Monument*, in 1988. This was during the apartheid period. The former of these paintings features a room with food, statues, and other materials in abundance. In the painting, is a large table filled with so much food that we cannot see any room for more, there are more candles than there needed to be, there are Michelangelo-esque sculptures scattered in the background, and there is a monkey on the table, among so much other material. The mountainous hoards and drapes at the top invite the viewer to the perspective of watching this room from outside through a window. The imagery references the baroque style with the colouring of antique browns, golds, and reds. This painting, with everything in it, symbolises the state of amassed generational wealth. It can either be overwhelming to the viewer as they attempt to determine the necessity of each object in the room, or make them desire being in that room, or hungry for the food.

Patience on a Monument depicts a Black woman peeling a citrus fruit and sitting atop hordes of things and a debris of historical events and the people who were part of it all. She is looking high and forth. Her sights neither set on the mounts of visual noise that she sits on nor is she looking at the orange she is peeling. The tiny events happening and the people visible within the background include figures wearing the British army red coat uniform, there are warriors donning the Zulu traditional armour with spears, and ordinary civilians. The different figures are seemingly charging forwards, seemingly running away, or lying down on the ground, and others can be seen crying for or mourning them. The background gives us an impression of the different groups of people, positions and circumstances that individuals and communities were in during that era.



Figure 1: Penny Siopis, *Melancholia*, 1986, Oil on canvas, 197.5 cm x 175.5 cm, Johannesburg Art Gallery collection. Photo sourced from the internet.

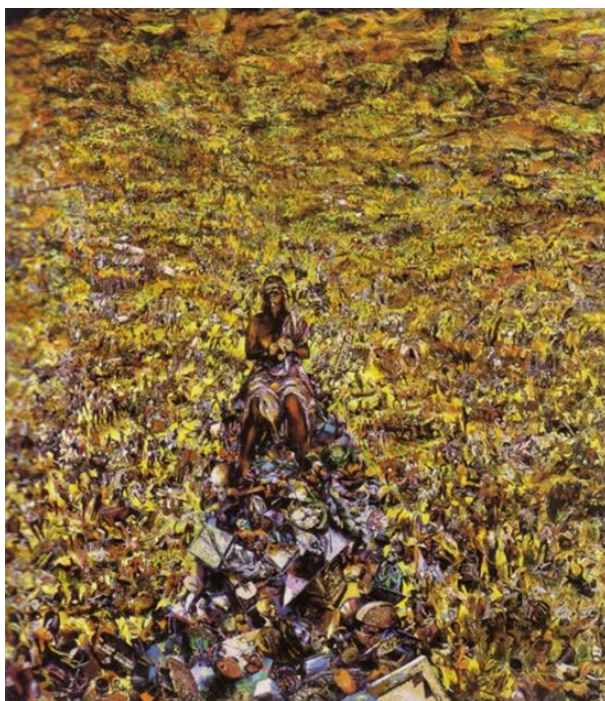


Figure 2: Penny Siopis, *Patience on a Monument*, 1988, Mixed media on canvas, 198 cm x 176 cm, William Humphrey's Art Gallery collection. Photo from Artthrob.

“A bold, rude, kaleidoscopic painting that was literally too full of itself” (Smith 2005: n), *Melancholia* reveals the wealthy side of racial segregation and oppression by which the nation’s resources and materials that were obtained through violent means, were then hoarded and withheld in excess, as represented by the loads of possessions and cuisines that are in the room of this painting. Luyanda Dube and Patrick Ngulube (2012: 69) speak about the system of apartheid as the institutionalisation of racial and cultural “homogeneity and divisions”; they make note that there are people who seek to uphold such a system because it benefited them while, on the other hand, others seek to shift away from it entirely and towards democracy because they need and want the better life they were deprived of. In the painting, Dube and Ngulube’s (2012) points are demonstrated by the keeping of material things within a single room instead of having them in multiple rooms or in the outdoors for the people on the other side of the walls and drapes to also have their access. In this one room, some people can come in all they want to either put in more objects or take from the horde. On the other hand, others do not have the luxury of even imagining this room, or they only ever dream about it.

Meant “to bring about change in the country” (Williamson 1989: 9), *Patience on a Monument* is a visual recount of the actions and consequences of apartheid. In other words, the painting has visualised the occurrences and outcomes of a system of racial and cultural segregation, subjugation, and discrimination being upheld and maintained for as long as apartheid was. Black South Africans, much like the woman on the monument, are presently sitting on the inequalities and other social, political, and economic injustices that were created by apartheid. If one were to visit any village, township, and suburb in South Africa today, there are devastating remnants of the socio-economic dynamic of upper-middle-lower classes – in which lower class people, majority being Black (as represented by the skin colour of the woman in this painting), can live in extreme poverty and not have an equal opportunity to a better life (Mapadimeng 2012). On the other hand, White South Africans continue to make up most of the middle to upper economic status whereby they live comfortably or they are wealthy, with more privileges in life (Modiri 2012).

The artworks can be considered representative of Siopis’ perception of a time she once knew, a time she and many other South Africans lived through. However, it can also be argued that her positionality as a White South African woman places her on one side of history and not on the

other. It is to be noted that this argument stands on an understanding of how the history was and how life works today because of that history, without any evidence of her personal experiences and feelings. Siopis, as the artist of these two artworks, is part of a world with access to the room of *Melancholia* (i.e., the benefits White people gained from apartheid and colonisation), she would not be considered one of the people outside of the room beyond the drapes, she is of a different side to the woman of Colour in *Patience*. Taking a step back, this research is rooted in the idea that her abstract artworks have the capacity to visually represent emotions or, to be more specific, the expressions of emotions. Therefore, I cannot overlook that the historical paintings can also stand as representations of the emotional responses to that time, as much as the scenes and subjects of any painting in the world can be read as portrayals of emotions. In that case, also keeping in mind Dewey's cycle of art (e.g., art is created from the artist's experience, the experience is embedded in the object of art, and that object becomes experiences in a special way by the viewer), whether Siopis from her social and political positionality could have captured those emotions in the authentic way someone with first-hand experience would have is open for debate. At the heart of this debate is the fact that her identity as a White South African woman is of a positionality that has been systematically distanced from Blackness throughout the history depicted in the paintings.

Okwui Enwezor (1997: 34) said, "we all see the same thing, and thus believe that our gazes are constituted and therefore affirmed and defined by the same regime of looking". There is an understanding and sharing of other people's feelings through knowing how we would feel if what we witnessed or heard of them experiencing ever happened to us. Has empathy allowed us to connect to different people, support and build meaningful relationships with one another? The answer is a definite yes. However, the extent to which one person can empathise with another cannot be fully determined because seeing pain, for example, and feeling the pain from one single event are distinct experiences from each other. The same applies to happiness and any other emotion. The saying does go 'you can put yourself in another person's shoes', but you can only walk for long in them. While on this subject, a factor to consider is that the non-representational paintings, including the *Atlas* series, are of a psychical nature and do not contain subjects that bear the characteristics of a particular race or culture, they are simply red figures. One could say that they can be given the positionality of their artists. In response to that, I call upon these words of Penny Siopis from the research introduction, as cited in Stevenson Gallery (2020: n): "each

[painting of the exhibition *In The Air*] seems like a scene – someone described seeing operas – but you can't tell what's going on. [There are] stains and swathes that have the feeling of water, wind, fire". You cannot tell what they are. They are clearly tied to nature, to human nature. Hence I can easily adopt the notion that they are the physical forms of our emotions.

I posit that the closest things to the representation of human emotions are the foregrounded human statues in *Melancholia*, which are that of a woman sitting on a bed at the left side of the painting and that of a man posed by the table at the right. The heads of the statues have turned inward and their faces are expressing resigned emotions. From that, and given the title, I infer that the painting is a representation of the sadness. Moreover, Richard Cheales saying that there is "so much in one picture" when talking about this painting (Smith 2005: 3) could connote feelings of emptiness at the realisation that the horde means absolutely nothing beyond its materiality or that it could plainly disappear someday. The nakedness of the statues suggests the feeling of comfort, which is typical in the case of having large amounts of possessions and food or from holding the belief that it is simply natural to amass such great amounts of wealth.

In *Patience*, the woman is sitting above historical debris in an environment that has, as Siopis stated, "no horizon" (Olivier 2014: 59). Her gaze could symbolise an expression of the compounded emotions of frustrated resignation, which is also denoted through her seemingly lack of interest in her activity of peeling the orange. Yet, the whole image of her can be judged as having some small sense of hopefulness because the peeling of this fruit may symbolise that there is life beyond the history behind her as there is an orange fruit within the orange peels. The fabric revealing her right breast, an intimate part of the body that connotes vulnerability, which is a typical psychological response to the political invasion of the private self that was experienced by Black bodies when apartheid policies assumed control of their freedoms. For instance, there was no privacy for the Black individual because they constantly had to produce a pass almost everywhere they went, no security for Black communities because they could not rely on their own country for the human rights they were entitled to, and no freedom of movement because they had limited access to spaces by the powers that were.

According to Cristina Montiel and Arvin Boller (2017), social and political landscapes as well as shifts in the landscape of a nation have serious effects on the collective emotions of the people. The most common emotion that stems from experiencing oppression and facing injustice is collective indignation, and it is expressed through the feelings of anger perceived (by the oppressed) as necessary for there to be justice and change (Montiel & Boller 2017). Because emotions are complex structures of human nature, anger is not always simply anger. Anger is compounded with the spectrum of emotions that can have sadness on one end and hope on the other. According to Linda Levine (1996), sadness stems from events of the past (e.g., the pile of history in *Patience*) or a predicted future (e.g., the anticipated loss of wealth and abundance portrayed in *Melancholia* as triggered by imagining the outcomes of unfolding events). Levine (1996) also states that hopefulness is felt because of looking at the bright side of an uncertain future (e.g., the woman on a monument having turned her gaze forward and upward) or holding on to the past (e.g., the wishful thinking that the wealth and abundance will continue to be there as they had always been there before).

These two historical paintings contain representational elements that are far more realist and distinct than Siopis' later paintings. Unlike with the *Atlas* paintings, we can see the British army and groups of people (as tiny as they have been painted), we can see skin colour, fabric, food, and the hands and breast in *Patience* – these are all clear as day; we can see what is going on. The paintings are emotive, as all art can be, and they can be read as representing the different psychological responses that I have associated them with, such as the collective frustration, anger sadness, and hope. Any face in the world can show us signs of these feelings. However, I must say that an object as clear as an orange or a statue does not quite capture materialised essence of emotion that I have imagined in this research in the same way the scene of a figure submerged in a pool of red liquid substance (from the *Shame* painting in Figure 11) or a walking figure engulfed by a flame-like substance (from *Atlas II* painting number 13) would have captured said essence. I consider the mentioned objects from the historical paintings to be definitive, while the scenes from the abstract paintings are of a more imaginative nature. On the other hand, one might argue that there really is no difference in whether orange peels or a puddle of red can be symbolic of distinct emotions. Later in this chapter, I will be exploring the artworks from the *Shame* series, which marks the shift of Siopis' art practice, and then applying my chosen methodology to the *Atlas*

paintings. It will be clearer just how this distinction can play out: picking apart the historical paintings and associating certain emotional responses to historical events to the imagery they present versus seeing the form that our formless emotions in and of themselves can be imagined as having through the contemporary abstract paintings.

Being Mesmerised and Moved by History

Candice Kramer, an artist whose art practice is to her a “deep inner need to express [herself]” and “to create the beauty that [she sees]”, was once asked about her favourite artist in a interview, to which she replied, “Penny Siopis – I remember seeing her work *Melancholia* on a trip to the Johannesburg Art Gallery and being mesmerised by her use of colour and paint” (Muchemwa 2021: n). being mesmerised by a painting, as in the experience that was had by Lisa Gwen Baldacchino, also translates to feeling “easily transported into the folds and layers of the works” (Stivala 2017: 70). This highlights how much emotional depth the aesthetic experience can have when the mental activity of mental transportation is brought into the conversation.

Kramer and Baldacchino’s mesmerisation speaks to the visual elements of the *Melancholia* and other paintings as well as to the beauty of their scenes or the materiality and creativity from which they were formed. Baldacchino’s experience has some similarities to the way some people feel when they are watching a film or reading a novel and are absorbed by its story, to the point that they become lost to that particular fictional world and begin having some fraction of an emotional connection with the main characters (Green et al. 2004). Lost – the word we mainly use in speaking about this mental transportation. In terms of Siopis’ historical paintings, people can formulate their own conclusions from the various judgments they make about that historical context and perhaps have empathy for those who have suffered through that history, thus ending up with an affective experience of the paintings. Mesmerisation can be a strong emotion that involves entrancement, but it can also be an emotion that simply involves appreciation. If someone says they were mesmerised, we question whether they were empathetic towards the lives from which the mesmerising artwork was drawn and whether they

could have picked up the emotions that the art could be portraying. Furthermore, we question if they simply enjoyed the art and appreciate it for its aesthetic quality. We feed our wonder, I believe, in understanding what the artwork means for us particularly; in responding as naturally to what the artwork is as we would to the scene in the artwork if we were really part of it.

Alice Toich, an artist whose art practice involves “solving problems”, said: “I remember seeing *Patience on a Monument* and feeling very moved”, considering it in terms of her own cultural background and reaching a point where she draws inspiration from Siopis in creating her own paintings (Hlalethwa 2018: n). As per the practice artmaking, Siopis’ historical paintings can be considered representations of her perceptions and perspectives of South Africa at the time as an artist. She was particularly moved to visualise and materialise those historical events as she saw and thought of them. As such, her audiences can be moved by the imagery of her artistic thinking.

As stated in Artthrob (2016: n), “there is a sense of intimacy and personal closeness of experiences in the narratives of Siopis’ works, however, they do bridge over to a wider global social context and how the viewer relates to the fragility of the subject”. This kind of mental effort of crossing that bridge and breaking down what lies beneath the subjects to fathom these artworks in a way that meaningfully plays along with the scope of this research says a lot about the emotional qualities that most art is capable of emitting. The mood we can pick up from objects of art because of the creativity that the artist put into their portrayals and such tends to make us look deeply to further understand what we are picking up from its visual elements and meanings, and why that is. In all of this looking, some of us end up projecting our own life experiences and feelings onto it to position ourselves in the historical contexts it is presenting to the viewers, working from both personal and collective memory or other aspects that enriched our knowledge of the things we see in that particular moment within that artwork.

The Shame Series

Paintings that form part of the *Shame* series have been showcased from as early as the 2000s – in an exhibition *Shame* (2003) at the University of the Witwatersrand and Kappatos Gallery as well as another exhibition *Three Essays on Shame* (2005) at the Freud Museum. In 2021, there were two more appearances of the series, one at the Stevenson Gallery and another at the *Shadow Shame Again* group exhibition at the Peltz Gallery. The series features mixed-media paintings including a variety of, and predominantly darker, shades of red as a significant visual element. *Shame* is made up of paintings with variant displays of either faces with horrified expressions and piercing googly eyes, or bodies that are engaged in a particular action, during a particular bodily function, as if going through sharp pains, or carrying another body or a large substance, amongst other things. Some of the paintings contain phrases such as “I’m sorry”, which is the predominant one, “the hardest thing to SEE is what’s in front of your Eyes”, “Happy Mother’s Day”, “thank you for sharing this day with us. Today’s Your Day!”, “perfect”, and many other such remarks. Body parts such as hands also make appearances in some of the paintings, either covering the mouth of the subject or suspended in the air. There are also paintings pools or patches of dark red, seemingly liquid substances, at times with a body or body-like shapes submerged within them or forming part of them. The paintings are small in size and minimalistic, compacted together to create one big giant screen.



Figure 3: Penny Siopis, paintings from the *Shame* Series, 2002-2005, Mixed media. Photo from Stevenson Gallery.



Figure 4: Penny Siopis, *Shame* (with the subject engaged in a particular action), 2004, Photocopy transfer Sugarlift Aquatint, 37.8 cm x 45.5 cm. Photo from David Krut Projects.



Figure 5: Penny Siopis, *Shame Again* (with the subject during a particular bodily function), 2004, Photocopy transfer Sugarlift Aquatint, 37.8 cm x 45.5 cm. Photo from David Krut Projects.



Figure 6: Penny Siopis, *Get Well Soon* (with the subject seemingly in bodily pain), 2004, Photocopy transfer Sugarlift Aquatint, 37.8 cm x 45.5 cm. Photo from David Krut Projects.



Figure 7: Penny Siopis, *Shame painting* (with one figure carrying and being one with another), 2002-2005, Mixed media on paper. Photo from Artthrob.



Figure 8: Penny Siopis, *I'm Sorry* ("I'm Sorry"), 2002-2005, Mixed media on paper. Photograph by Mario Todeschini from New Frame.



Figure 9: Penny Siopis, *Shame painting* ("the hardest thing to SEE is what's in front of your Eyes"), 2002-2005, Mixed media on paper. Photograph from the Artthrob Archive.



Figure 10: Penny Siopis, *Shame painting* ("Happy Mother's Day"), 2002-2005, Mixed media on paper. Photo from New Frame.



Figure 11: Penny Siopis, *I'm Sorry* ("thank you for sharing this day with us. Today's Your Day!"), 2002-2005, Mixed media on paper. Photograph by Mario Todeschini from New Frame.



Figure 12: Penny Siopis, *Hush Little Baby* ("perfect"), 2002-2005, Mixed media on paper. Photograph supplied to Pumla Gqola from New Frame.

Siopis has likened the making of these paintings to engaging with human corporeality, stating that cutting through the surface of the paint on the canvas is like cutting through flesh, then the paint dries up and the cut looks like wounded skin (Richards 2005). She additionally stated that we, as humans, have had the habit of associating “the inside of the body with psychological vulnerability” (Richards 2005: 17). Siopis’ assertion alludes to instances such as when people consider their heart as a symbol of love or desire, their blood as a symbol of psychological pain, and other organs as symbols of various emotional aspects of the psyche. Based on this notion, the idea that the visual elements of the paintings can be viewed as visualisations of the psychological self becomes more strident. As she once claimed, emotion develops physicality through the visual representations of the paintings (Olivier 2014). We can then understand what psychological conditions such as feeling ashamed could look like as depictions of open flesh, blood spots, dripping blood, open or almost healing wounds, and so forth.

In layman’s terms, as stated by Aksil Rain (2022), shame is an emotion that can have a negative impact on the internal self, that can induce feelings of guilt or regret on the self especially after experiencing or witnessing a distressful or humiliating situation. While it is experienced by oneself, it has public implications. It has to do with societal norms and values, the morality or immorality of behaviours, and the consequences of particular actions. It constitutes multiple dimensions that make it extremely difficult to define (Rain 2022). Siopis’ understanding and artistic exploration make shame a strong state of the mind that is often followed by “moments of extreme psychic pain or humiliation” (Olivier 2014: 144). When it comes to Siopis’ paintings, shame can also be understood as the result of violence enacted upon the body – often “racial and sexual violence” (Gqola 2021: n). Moreover, there are many factors that constitute its presence in human life: “as art historian Griselda Pollock has variously said, shame is both psychological and political. It is form and mobile. Specifically, in Siopis’ treatment, it is also historically constituted, inflected and reconstituted” (Gqola 2021: n). The fact that shame is such a complex emotion could make some people wonder if it can be as straightforwardly perceived in these paintings as anticipated in this research.

Michelle May (2017: 44), whose evaluation of shame shares the same perspective as Siopis by assuming the theoretical underpinnings of psychoanalysis and psychodynamics, elaborates on what shame looks like by stating that “research has shown a universal expression of shame (a shame display), viz. lowering of the eyes, decreased muscle tone of face and neck resulting in the lowering of the head, as well as using the face, body, words and actions to appear smaller and non-threatening and communicating retreat, surrender and appeasement”. One of the paintings (Figure 13) features a red figure entangled by barbed wire, a white hand on the right and a pink hand on the left covering the mouth of the figure with the words “I believe in YOU!” written on it, and the YOU (in capital letters) has been double underlined, which signifies that point about shame being a personal emotion. Although not lowered, the blue eyes of the figure with dilated pupils, which were made from found objects, are displaying the feeling of being horrified or scarred, almost as if there was a doing or witnessing of something wrong, unspeakable and unbelievable. The eyes are foregrounded in the painting, and this could be because they seemingly want to tell a story that the mouth would not easily utter.

There is another painting (Figure 4) with a red figure appearing to be kneeling, the head of which is lowered with eyes looking to the ground, with undiscernible words and marks on the back. The figure is acting in a way that can be likened to pleading or praying for forgiveness. The painting becomes a visual representation of May’s (2017) description of the bodily manifestation of shame (from the previous paragraph). As with the paintings mentioned in this section, Siopis additionally uses words in some of the paintings, illustrating how shame is also reliant on words to be mitigated. For example, when someone says “I’m sorry” in the hopes that their shame may be forgiven so that they can feel it less.



Figure 13: Penny Siopis, Shame painting (I Believe in YOU!), 2002-2005, Mixed media and found objects on paper. Photograph by Mario Todeschini from Daily Maverick.

The colour red has become a significant part and a sort of signature of Siopis' artistic practice. In Chinese culture, there are references made to the expression of shame in red: "people's face will "feel hot" when they are "burning with shame"; "their face will also turn red" from "blushing with shame or embarrassment" (Yu 2002: 344). As it can be seen, the faces and bodies in the *Shame* paintings are various shades of red. The figure of the mouth covered by a pink hand and in barbed wire is red. Not only that, but the texture of the face is also like an open wound – fleshy and bloody, with a darker shade of red streaming from its eyes to create tears.

The following quote is from a tale about the shame of a young woman who gets her period in-between an interrogation and is forced to talk about it to a male officer, which shows us how shame can be situated in society while also revealing the colour of shame:

'I've taken my period,' she said simply, 'I need some sanitary napkins and a wash'. He looked at her with disgust, 'Have you no shame? I've been married twenty years and my wife wouldn't mention things like that'. What is the colour of shame? All she could see was red as it trickled down her legs" (Murphy 1989 as cited in Aretxaga 1995: 139).

This story supports the statement mentioned before, of how we tend to associate our internal materiality, such as our blood, with our elements of our psyche. Moreover, Siopis' visual displays of shame are a grand highlight of the existing considerations of the forms that the emotion of shame can take. I do have to wonder what emotion I would have picked up from these paintings had they not be given this blatant title. Hence the aesthetic experience is such an important factor in how we can understand objects of art. Had Siopis not told her audience that she is addressing shame in this body of work, I would have (as many of us, I imagine) gone with the kind of feelings I got

looking at and judging them. A friend of mine, while curiously going through the endless papers on my desk, told me that some of the *Shame* paintings, the ones with the pools or stains of bloods specifically, reminded her of the period, just like with the above story's portrayal of shame. Because women have this intimate, sacred, and very secretive biological relationship with their blood, I will defend the idea that many of us would be driven to feel something that resembles being ashamed at the sight of these paintings, which would have informed what they are and what they mean.

A Sharing of Shame

Shame is the kind of emotional response to an event whereby many people would choose to be isolated rather than to be in the crowd. With instances that range from the awkwardness of crossing the road when the robot is seconds away from turning red to the insecurities we have about our biological functionality, there is always the element of feeling watched and judged, and wanting to hide from those imagined eyes and their judgments. As once stated by Noah Swinney (2021: n) in his review of the exhibition *Shadow Shame Again*, the emotion shame is simply “a trauma too difficult to be spoken, too dark to be seen, distorts and fragments meaning, it is too difficult to see and speak of”. Therefore, those feeling shame must prefer to keep it to themselves and metaphorically wear layers of other emotions that would intently not remind others of shame. Emma Dollery (2021: n) also attested to this idea: if we looked carefully, somewhere on the spectrum of vulnerability that is brought onto people by their formulated ideas of shame is the strong belief that they are “overexposed, or under scrutiny” and thinking that they need to “close themselves off from the world completely, in order to escape that exposure”. As such, I can imagine how disruptive this could be in terms of the affective aesthetic experience, the emotions that come and linger when one sees these paintings.

A guest contributor (David Krut Projects 2017: n) shared their experience with this series, saying that “when shamed, we lose our dignity and integrity in full view of others – we live in a state of disgrace”. Furthermore, this guest contributor exclaimed that there was “another

dimension of shame” that particularly interested them, which is the perspective that the emotion of shame offered them an opportunity “for empathy”. In this instance, instead of people being reminded of disgraceful past times and having some sense of shame awakened within them, seeing the paintings could allow them to feel for others who are known or imagined to have experienced shame. In the South African context, people also use the word ‘shame’, or a phrase like ‘ag shame man, it will be all right’ to express that they understand and identify with the anguish of someone’s feelings of indignity or moment of insecurity (Dollery 2021). Because shame relies on ideologies and discourses of social, cultural, and religious norms and practices, it is a public spectacle with the community at its foundations, although it is very private and entirely has much to do with the individual. This means that an experience of the paintings in this series can become not only about the self but also about others; it can become a sharing of shame whereby a single viewer may end up feeling a particular shame they have once or twice had to deal with or thinking about confronting their own shame or end up projecting their empathy onto the figures of the paintings or other viewers.

Atlas I and Atlas II

Earlier in the chapter, I discussed the physical elements and the meanings that can be drawn from historical paintings, *Melancholia* and *Patience on a Monument*. I also performed a brief assessment of selected paintings from the *Shame* series. This was to support the notion that Siopis’ paintings can be considered from an affective perspective, that they can be seen as containing the visual forms of general feelings. However, a distinction was made between the historical, and more representational, paintings and paintings of *Shame* which are closer in abstraction to the *Atlas* series. Example A being the fact that the colour red is the very first aspect that the viewer will most likely take notice of because it is such a prominent feature in most of her later works. As stated previously, as much as any painting in the world has the capacity to be read in anyway based on the element of subjectivity in the aesthetic experience, the historical paintings are most likely to carry more of the societal and political discursive viewpoints from the viewers as per the literature review in this. With the contemporary paintings, there is much room for the

psychological turn. The title of the series itself, *Shame*, is an invitation for viewers to direct the conversations inwardly, to be face-to-face with thoughts, discussions, and practices of shame as an emotion that can be experienced at any point of daily life.

In this following section of the chapter, I shall be demonstrating the reading that the *Atlas* series portrays distinct human emotions in this section of the chapter. There will first be a discussion of Atlas I and Atlas II as a collective, which will be followed by a thorough formal analysis of *Atlas I* painting number 14, which I shall unofficially refer to as *The Floating Head* for the sake of this research, as well as Atlas II painting number 13, whose unofficial name shall be *The Gush of Flames*. Furthermore, I will be using references to emotions from different art forms such as music, dialogue from films or novels, poems or stories, and other media and literature to demonstrate exactly how a visual element can be claimed to look like a certain emotion. In the artist statement video on the In The Air exhibition page of the Stevenson Gallery website, some *Atlas* paintings can be seen in Siopis' studio and she is conversing about the paintings and taking the audience through her process. Describing what the series is about, Penny Siopis said,

"*Atlas* is a collection of paintings, each an autonomous world and simultaneously part of a constellation. Here, particular intimacy and larger visual body converge. There is singularity and multiplicity, a kind of open form. *Atlas* has many associations. One is Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* – his 1920s collection of seemingly unrelated images which he juxtaposed in ways that drew out their visual and psychological connections, mainly through the gestures of figures often from myth. The figures in my *Atlas* all emerge through the material process. The medium exercises a strong agency. There are no actual external references, material acts to become a sort of figure-ground relationship, which could be a scene, a picture, an emotional state." (Atlas 2020: n).



Figure 14: Penny Siopis, *Atlas I*, 2020, Glue, ink, and oil on paper, 25 pieces 27.5 cm x 37.5 cm, Photo sourced from Stevenson Gallery.



Figure 15: Penny Siopis, *Atlas II*, 2020, Glue, ink, and oil on paper, 32 pieces 27.5 cm x 37.5 cm, Photo sourced from Stevenson Gallery.



Figure 16: Aby Warburg, *Mnemosyne Atlas* (Panel 46, 47, and 48). Photo of 'Aby Warburg's Bilderatlas Mnemosyne exhibition at Haus der Kulturen der Welt' sourced from A*DESK: Critical Thinking.

From the exhibition statement (Stevenson Gallery 2020: n), *In The Air* (2020) was about focusing “on materiality and the ‘life’ of non-human matter”, “extending [an] inquisition on contingency, empathy and the imaginative possibilities of formlessness”, bringing forth visual representations of “individual catastrophes”, and presenting “anxieties around vulnerability, violence and environmental collapse”. In her work, Siopis makes references to the human condition and acknowledges humanity then deals with that psychologically. As such, offering to viewers themes of existentialism (i.e., individuals finding their positionality in the natural world and engaging with their mortality), humanism (i.e., societies acknowledging the fragility of materiality and striving for the betterment of humanity), and environmentalism (i.e., individuals and institutions actively challenging centuries of the destruction of the natural world by preserving its ecosystems from the growing fears of its predicated end). All of these concepts are tied to the psyche, and one example is the anxious emotions that arise within us when we are confronted with the inevitable death of ourselves and our species in any capacity, through different natural disasters or global medical pandemics.

There are 57 small paintings from *Atlas I* and *Atlas II* combined, and they are mixed media on paper. As with paintings of *Shame*, *Atlas* artworks are predominated by the colour red. There are about four paintings that are oceanic blue. Some paintings are more orange than they are red. The

paintings seem like a collection of sequences, with each of them playing a significant role in the telling of an entire story. Because there are so many of them taking up a lot of wall space, the viewers would have most likely looked at them in chronological sequence: from the top point of one end to the bottom point of another end, staring at them one after the other, starting from the typical direction – the entrance of the art gallery. Like with films or photo albums, every scene or every image contains a connection to another. With the *Atlas* paintings, although each small painting is different, they hold similarities such as traces of liquid, flames, clouds, backgrounds that take the form of walls or floors, and (most importantly) the presence of a figure or substance, mostly standing, dripping, flaring, or floating about. There is motion yet there is stillness. I was in such a state of anxiously waiting in my experience of these paintings, because looking at them made me feel as if something had just happened is yet to happen. A similar feeling to the instances wherein an action or event occurred, and you are in a state of fully knowing that an emotional response most appropriate to it has either unfolded or is yet to be felt.

The following descriptions are of scenes from each set that offer brief demonstrations of the analysis from the previous paragraph – that is if one were dared to explain them using only one sentence. In *Atlas I*, there is a painting of a floating red head with an orange wall as the background with almost microscopic incisions revealing that there is a blue layer underneath (from paper number 14). In *Atlas II*, there is one depicting a figure either standing or walking to a place when suddenly its whole body is swallowed by a wave of flames from both sides (from paper number 13). These scenes are very intense because it is as if the viewer is watching someone or something existing through thermal vision, as if they are witnessing the ultra-personal results of a thermography test. As a note, these two paintings have been selected to represent a larger body of work as part of this study's deep dive into the formal elements that make *Atlas* what it is. This method resembles, in a way, a biologist in a laboratory placing a sample in a Petri dish to grow it out for an in-depth study of its nature and characteristics. The information obtained from the sample refers to the whole body from which it came. That is how interconnected I believe each of the paintings in this series are.

Atlas I: The Floating Red Head



Figure 17: Penny Siopis, *Atlas I* (Painting no. 13), 2020, Glue, ink, and oil on paper, 27.5 cm x 37.5 cm. Photo sourced from Stevenson Gallery.

This painting depicts a glossy bodiless red head with a thick set of hair floating in the air from the right direction. The background is an orange wall that is coarse and plastered, revealing red and blue spots from underneath. In the whole *Atlas I* set, this piece is located on the third of five rows and the fourth of five columns. One can say the head is floating from painting number 15, which depicts a red block of plastered bricks with a crack from top left corner in which head-like rock has been lodged, and floating towards the thirteenth painting depicting orange/yellow figures that seem to be in a sort of conference of confrontation with one curled up on the floor while the other is on a bed.

This outlook falls in line with the scope of Siopis' artistic practice of process. She captures the notion that emotions are not simply just there, they are highly active and acting and interacting with the environment. As it has been evidenced in Siopis' artistry working "with process, change, transformation", seeing her "materials as vibrant, as having a distinct capacity to act and react with other forces", and having said that "when glue clogs I must wet the affected area, scrub it down and peel away the obdurate bits, and then re-throw the raw spot. The surrounding site must be

damp for the new and old glue to meld in sympathetic ways. If things don't gel then I must repeat the process" (Perryer 2018: 9 and 23). The subject in this painting resembles this very process because it seems to be engaged in moving from and/or towards a certain place.

In the demonstration that there are representations of emotion, the following characteristics are to be explored and associations are to be made. The subject in this piece is a bodiless head with a glossy texture and a red colour. It appears to be floating because there is no surface or structure for its supporting. Because it has visibility and therefore existence, it has to exist in a particular environment, which I presumed to be air but could also be water. Finally, the head is followed by either a set of hair, a tail, or the marks of its movement with the same semblance of footprints that figures tend to leave behind as they walk.

The idea of floating means having an intense emotional state because the painting shows that one loses a sense of themselves through the subject being bodiless, physical space through the wavy hair, and time because there is no indication of it. In their song, pop-rock duo Rebel Kicks associated the state of a floating head to pain and fear, which lyrics such as "Are you feeling like you're wandering, holding in your breath? Are you reaching in the dark, talking to yourself again?", "You will find a way to rebuild again and heal your pain.", "Are you feeling paralyzed?", and "From all the things that make you feel so scared and afraid to live" in the song *Floating* (2021). These words express a state of unwellness. In Jennifer Niven's fictional young adult story *All the Bright Places* (2015), there is a quote saying "it takes many, many coats to cover the colour red. No matter what I do, it seeps right through, like the walls are bleeding." The novel explores emotions of grief and sadness, which are often expressed through isolation as well as despondent facial expressions, and often feel like there is physical hurt in the chest or as if the heart is literally bleeding.

Looking closer at the head in this piece, it becomes clearer that the redness has indeed been revealed from beneath the orange that was layered over the entire image. The emotions of pain, fear, grief, and sadness are clearly represented by the different elements in this piece – the red of the head and the seemingly thick layering of paint from which it emerges, the way it appears to float, and the imagining that it floats in some muddled state of the sky or the drowning state of

water. These are known as negative emotions and can be prevalent in and resultant from cases of anxiety, which is the emotion encircling the themes of the exhibition these paintings were first featured in. Considering the theory that grounds this research, which is on the flow, the performativity, and the situatedness of affect, the head is a significant site to present emotions. Conventional psychology wants us to affect is in the mind and Michael Billig argues that “thinking and emoting are not a set of hidden processes taking place in an individual’s mind emerging in uncontested bulletins like ‘I am angry’; thinking and feeling are, in fact, social acts taking place through the manifold public and communal resources of language” (Wetherell 2012: 73). Both of these ideas are not to be taken as mutually exclusive. The head is corporeal and expressive because it has a face through which affect can be performed in various and visible ways. It is also psychological and abstract because emotions are formulated and flow within the person. The presence of the head are demonstrations of this corporeality and the floating and waviness reveal the psychological aspect of affect.

Atlas II: The Gush of Flames



Figure 18: Penny Siopis, *Atlas II* (Painting no. 14), 2020, Glue, ink, and oil on paper, 27.5 cm x 37.5 cm. Photo sourced from Stevenson Gallery.

In the first appearance of *Atlas II*, this piece is placed on the second of four rows and the fifth of eight columns. It is situated between the twelfth piece, which depicts the scenery off a waterfall with a yellow liquid substance falling on the left side into a yellow-white mass with the characteristics of a body of water, as well as the fourteenth piece depicting a very dark space with ashes at the bottom and a burning fire from within those ashes. This piece itself has depicted a figure whose legs were drawn to demonstrate the act of walking. There are yellow flames gushing from both sides of the fence that end up engulfing the walking figure.

Beyond this scene, at the crack of the top right corner, we can see small traces of blue that resemble the sky and white that seem like clouds that hover in the sky. The figure appears to have been walking towards this area of sky. This entire scene echoes the story of someone being in a dark tunnel and walking towards the light at the end. Substances that take the form of flames and lavas appear in multiple *Atlas* pieces, which reminds me of the way emotions interact with the person and their mind. Emotions appear, suddenly and instantaneously in every instance of existing in society, being in a single moment of time. Even stepping on a bus, which takes the shape of a tunnel, can induce a range of different emotions simply because of that event. There are also other factors such as stepping on a bus from another circumstance or from a recent different emotional state, that have the capacity to enter the bus event. Hence if emotions were to be given any form, fire seem most appropriate because of how it interact with matter: it ignites from something as simple as the flick of a match, it spreads uncontrollably once it attaches itself to things, and it absorbs when it touches.

Towards the end of French historical drama film *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019), one of the character's dress catches a small fire while at a bonfire. The film is about the heartbreaking love story between two women in a time, the 18th century, where such a love simply could never have been. It is also about womanhood in a time wherein women were not easily their own people in society. As such, this particular scene holds symbolism of the despair and fear that can hold onto someone when they feel as if they have or have had very little to no control over the present events unfolding in their life. The scene is similar to the *Atlas* piece because we can see the full body of the subjects in both images, meaning that we are presented with the full picture of their life. Furthermore, I believe that this piece portrays terrible and negative emotions, even more strongly

when I have a live-action reference, because the consequences of fire meeting with flesh are far unbearable.



Figure 19: The fire scene from *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019).

In the piece, the figure walks alone in the fire, walking step by step and taking the shortest strides possible to show slowness and the fear of collapsing to the ground. These are forms of physiological responses to the emotions, appearing as the flames, felt. Because the figure has no firm or, more specifically, a firmly outlined body, it means the sadness and fears felt have morphed with the subject. This is when we cross clinical lines. It now becomes clear why the word anxieties was used in the exhibition material for this body of work. These negative emotions depicted in the piece, and the previous one from *Atlas I*, appear as intense as an open wound (from the scraping method applied to have created the bodiless head) and burning flesh (from the walking figure engulfed by flames). As such, they are not simply ordinary. They can also be considered under the terms of psychological disturbances: depression and anxiety.

It was put best by Sarah Nuttall (2011: 289) when she said, “for Siopis, painting is a powerful physical means to materialise and visualise emotion. Her use of paint enables her to explore emotionally complex feelings, such as the knife edge between affirmation and negation, or assertive agency in relation to vulnerable victimhood”. Her use of paint and the elements of in painting number 14 are scenes to which this psychological event perfectly aligns:

During a burst of sharp emotion, the body pumps out a wide range of somatic signals. Many of these are initiated in the brain stem and driven by the autonomic nervous system (ANS), such as changes in blood flow resulting in blushing or blanching, changes in heart rate and in breathing rate. There are changes in the muscles as expressions drift across the face: smiles, frowns, various forms of wrinkling and twisting. Other

muscles work on posture and stance, modulating relaxation and tension, and producing the visceral clenching or calming of the guts. Within the brain and central nervous system (CNS), chemical transmitters make connections across neural synapses and pathways. Neural circuits begin to fire, rapidly conveying information” (Wetherell 2012: 29).

The use of words such as burst and fire, the explanation that the body and mind are an entire complex network through which affect does happen and can be known to be happening or as having happened are the visceral imagery we have encountered looking at this *Atlas* painting and the lot of them. You can see veins in the lines where the explosion is in the piece. You can see look of the whole body catching the emotion from the way the pain spread itself out during the artmaking process. All of these have been visually unified similarly to the way that we attempt to connect the dots in explaining the distinct feelings that run through our own systems. In everyday conversation, that is, we do say things such as, “I was so frightened, my heart felt like it was exploding”. In our displays of affect, people might say “she was burning with rage” or “she was consumed by her sadness” when describing the stated we may have expressed to them.

The Affective Possibilities of Atlas

From the previous section, it has been made clear that the paintings of *Atlas I* and *Atlas II* indeed hold up to the idea that they portray certain emotions that are familiar to us, as people existing in a world where such emotions can be felt and expressed in any single moment due to any circumstance of reality. The rest of Chapter 3 is about exploring what this then means for the knowledge we have about the aesthetic experience. It is said that “we are all emotional beings” and emotions are rooted in our “humanness” (Lawrence 2008: 66). When we have encounters with others or objects in our surroundings, they can have an emotional effect on us. Art objects, for one, were especially created to probe at the psyche of the people who view them and evoke explicit emotions from within them (Lawrence 2008). Throughout history, this has been proven as not only possible but also as conventional in the art world (Clore & Schnall 2008). Looking at the clear distinctions between Siopis’ historical, political still-life paintings and the contemporary, psychical abstract paintings, it makes me wonder if there are hierarchies of the affective aesthetic experience. Questions around whether or not different kinds of

paintings elicit different kinds of emotions or if different kinds of paintings can elicit the same kinds of emotions at varying levels spring to mind.

The above thought is especially relevant to this research because it stems from the widely known reality that every artist applies their interests and intentions to the object of their making. In her *Patience on a Monument* and *Melancholia* paintings, Siopis was directing attention and discourse towards apartheid, its events and consequences. For *Atlas* and other such of her recent works, she leaves much room for deep psychological reflection and engagement. This is not to say that these paintings can only be interacted with in one particular way. Psychology, as a discipline, has shown time and time again that we can still be critical and draw conclusions about human emotion that are based on some scientific standard. That is, some people do not always engage with art based on how they feel towards it, not every person will cry in front of a painting. However, they can still acknowledge and entertain the possibility of such emotional responses, they can understand that crying in front of a painting is a real occurrence.

As Siopis herself has stated regarding her artistic/artmaking process, “this raw matter is profoundly suggestive, and allows the thoughts and feelings pressing against my consciousness a medium and a venue for unfolding and playing out. Paint has – for me at least – always operated as a physical emanation of entangled or indivisible thoughts and feelings” (Pollock 2015: 172). This reveals her interests and intentions as the maker. It is evident from this quote that her work becomes a space for her to artistically express some of the emotions she has experienced in her life due to life’s events and human conditions. Witnessing Siopis’ paintings – for some people, given their interests in art appreciation, and to some extent – must involve a sense that it goes beneath and beyond the imagery that appears before our sensory perception. Furthermore, it can also be about understanding the process that created that same imagery (the colours and lines that have constructed it) and the agency intermingled in the process (the colours and lines having come together on the canvas to conceive of emotive scenes that we can be moved by and find pleasure in). As I have argued in the previous chapter, the imagery (as in the scenes and objects in the paintings) can be read as representations of her inner self, of our inner selves as humans.

As I have seen with Penny Siopis, artists whose artmaking process becomes part of engaging with their artworks essentially create an opportunity for the viewers to think beyond the painting and its visual elements, and to think about and feel towards the journey of its creation. Given the scope of this research, this opportunity sounds much like the process of experiencing emotions that happens in real life. When people experience an emotion, they often do not simply take the feeling for what it is; they also evaluate it and try to understand the journey of the event or condition that led up to that emotional moment (Grommisch et al. 2020). In the same sense, when a person encounters such paintings, they could also think about how she came to paint it, not only in terms of artistic labour but also considering her emotional background. In the instance of the *Atlas* paintings, she was in the state of isolation during the lockdowns of the COVID-19 global pandemic that many of us can relate to; she is disheartened by climate change and its impact on the environment and ecosystems as many of us are. Understanding the kind of mental space that she was in while creating the paintings can position us, as the audience, to engage with them in emotionally vulnerable and empathetic ways.

From a study conducted by Cheung-On Tam (2008) on the aesthetic experiences that people outside of the art world professional sphere have had, it was also found that having an emotional response because of or towards a painting is a real phenomenon. Some of the participants responded that they have experienced emotions and they understood it was the art that made them feel the way they did, yet it was challenging for them to completely articulate what emotion they were exactly feeling and why they got to the point of that emotional state. In this study (Tam 2008), some of the participants said that time seemed to stop because they were so absorbed in their experience. This reminded me of the time I forgot to leave an art gallery before closing time because I took longer than I realised to look at each of the paintings in the exhibition. Another aspect of the emotional experience was the forgetting of one's body which Julia Kristeva refers to (Georgelou 2014) when speaking about the unification of the self and the object that can occur when people are faced with objects that make it so they are confronted with their inner selves, such as seeing their mortality when looking at a corpse or facing their anxiety from the materialised trauma in Siopis' *Atlas* paintings.

To make us relate more to her art and artmaking process better, Siopis says: “if we just give the material world, the non-human world if you will, more of an opportunity to pass through our skins into us and we into it, then we [would not] have the same impulse to master or dominate it”, which means having a “desire to give over to the process” (Law 2020: n). Siopis is not entirely removed from the painting process because there are facets of it that she is very much involved in, including but not limited to the colours she chooses to pour over others, the amount of glue and ink she pours onto each paper, the position from which she pours the material, the tilting or moving of the paper, and the layering and scraping away of the material for there to be subjects that can be identified as figures or substances. However, I can argue that she falls distant enough from the process to marvel at her own work when she finally sees a painting and is satisfied enough to hang it to dry. She is also, like with her audience, in a position to be moved by her own work, even if it is not to the extent of the viewers who were not in the room as the paintings were coming together.

Because this is the first instance in her career as an artist that her paintings were in her living space and blended well into her life as did the furniture (Stevenson Gallery 2020), her creative process felt as if she was “one little speck of colour in all [the] glue writhing around the place”, with her home feeling to her “like a big painting” (Law 2020: n). There is a photograph on the *Arts and Letters Press* blog post (Law 2020) that captured a moment wherein her cat was walking on a canvas that was still a work in progress laid out on the ground; that moment was as if the painting was a (fictional) portal to another dimension. There is another photograph on the blog showing the paintings hanging together on an entire wall just a room away from her living room, as if they were doors to multiple different worlds (Law 2020; Stevenson Gallery 2020). Transporting herself between the day’s lunch and working on a painting connects her to the paintings in what I would say is a very strong and more meaningful way. Looking at the paintings becomes a portal through which artist and audience can engage with each other, given the matters Siopis is addressing and her hopes about how the viewers will formulate their own meanings from that.

Regarding these artworks, that the *Atlas* series was part of, Penny Siopis says, “call it consciousness, emotion, other things. All I can say is that whatever it is, for me it is felt as relational, and [it is] extraordinary now [what is] happening with larger questions around global warming and the virus [slash] pandemic, in these terms – [it is] an ethical relation” (Law 2020: n). According to Stephen Gardiner (2004), the problem of climate change that we are all facing as a global nation does indeed have to do with ethics; the perspectives of its concerns are rooted in our humanness and morals. This is because we, as humanity, have a distinct relationship with our world and its natural environments and resources, which consists of the structure of the planet having the capacity to preserve our lifespan and us having the ethical responsibility to ensure the planet’s safety and sustainability for all earthly life.

As represented in the *Atlas* paintings, a collapse in the structure of our planet that we depend on for life can awaken a set of negative/anxious emotions from within us: frustration or anger, sadness or despair, helplessness, loneliness, resignation, and so forth. The inclusion of emotions in the ethics of climate change is an essential element to the discourse and decision-making towards resolving the problem, maintaining sustainability, preserving what is left of the natural world, and therefore alleviating any emotional scarring (Roeser 2012). Climate change is bad for humanity – a statement that is grounded in scientific fact but still acknowledged as affecting people’s internal worlds.

Atlas in the Digital Sphere

The contemporary artworks of Penny Siopis were created into a world that people interact differently with – in the digital age. The year 2020 particularly saw a drastic shift in this interaction because of the COVID-19 global pandemic and lockdowns, we had to turn to our cellular and computer devices to communicate, work, see places, and fulfil other social practices that liven our humanity. Art galleries and museums were also affected by this because exhibitions and the aesthetic experience had to move online. Many would argue that this has negative implications on the art world which has historically relied on personal, social, and physical connections. Even Fisher’s exploration of affective interactions (2006) with art are

rooted in individuals being in the presence of artworks for the atmospheric charge needed in the emotional surge.

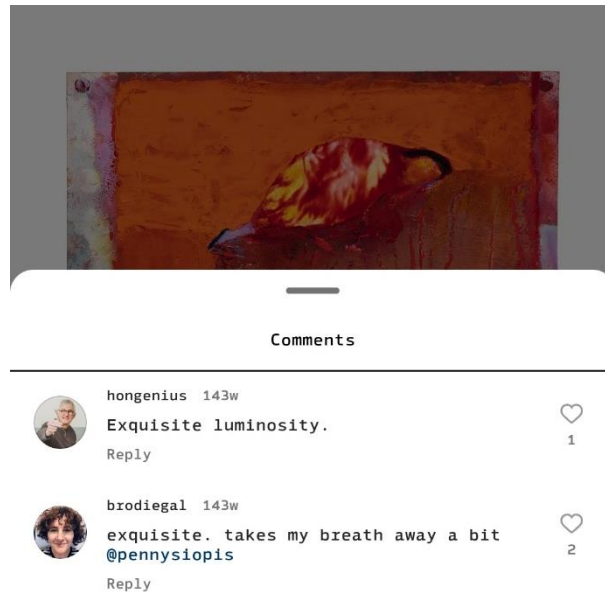
On one hand, a study has shown that galleries and museums have since turned to strategies of enhancing the online aesthetic experience that have yielded positive results in people's engagement with their art and artists (Habelsberger & Bhansing 2021). However, looking at the affective aspect of the aesthetic experience, such strategies should apparently include, "virtual exhibition views; an introduction of the gallery staff and gallery history to connect with [the digital browsers] on a more personal level; informative video and photo material about artists and their work practice; podcasts and Instagram talks with artists and experts; other interactive features that balance out the lack of emotional engagement (Habelsberger & Bhansing 2021: 16). Stevenson was one of the galleries that ensured that people still maintained their affection for art and that we could still have an incredible aesthetic experience, even during that time. Apart from the pandemic, not many people are able to make their visits because they live far away. During the period of 2020 and 2021, I was back home in Limpopo. As such, making regular exhibition visits to Johannesburg or Cape Town were not simply my reality. Yet, I still had to remain connected to the art world.

Stevenson had a virtual viewing room for this exhibition that people to see and they were active in presenting Penny Siopis and her work on Instagram. There were not so many comments as people typically only ever double-tap leave a heart on the post they like. On the other hand, some people only walk into the gallery, greet the host, enjoy the art, and leave with their feelings to themselves, to share with others at the dinner table, or with the audience of their own if they happen to be an art critic with a blog.

On a post from October 22, 2020, showing the images of *Atlas II* (no. 20 & 30) as well as *Atlas I* (no. 20) were two comments saying, "Exquisite luminosity" and "Exquisite. Takes my breath away a bit @pennysiopis". Another post of *Atlas I* (no. 5 & 9) and *Atlas II* (no. 23) from the same date garnered the comment, "Very special". On the post containing photographs of the room in which the *She Breathes Water* film and other small paintings were shown, of *Atlas I* (no. 4 & 14) and *Atlas II* (no 4 & 18) was a single comment that said "Wow @pennysiopis,

“Exquisite”





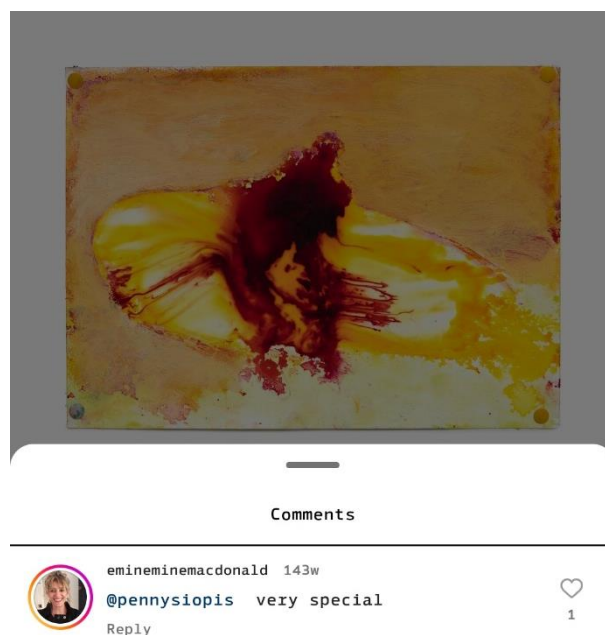
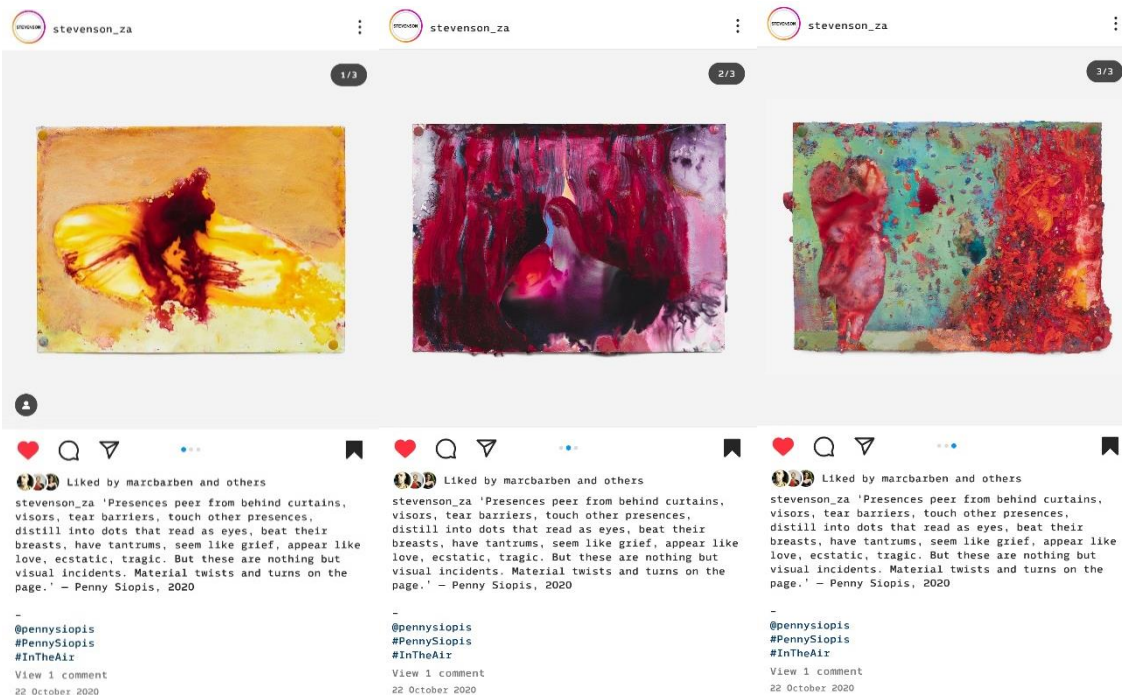
Figures 20: Instagram Post with three images and Comments 1 & 2, 2020, on Stevenson Gallery's In The Air exhibition's online promotion.

For the remainder of exploring the affective possibilities of Atlas, I will be unpacking the words that were used by the Instagram users above to show their appreciation for the artworks, so we can develop some sort of understanding of the affective aesthetic experience. Based on the literature review, there have been explorations of the different mental states that viewers can enter into when they have an aesthetic experience that have the potential to become affective, including what Csikszentmihalyi refers to as a state of “flow” (Pelowski & Akiba 2011). Apparently, an event or object can be considered exquisite when the person engaged in it has completely reached some state of being mentally absorbed, and the surroundings or objects with which they are engaging become the only stimuli streaming in their mind through the psycho-phenomenon of flow (Thomson & Jaque 2016). The viewer goes through a series of processes to achieve their full experience of a painting wherein they can claim that it is exquisite. This includes looking at all corners of the painting for a significant amount of time, walking closer/further or zooming in/out to watch certain elements, visually analysing distinct elements, and projecting their own life experiences and feelings that they closely associated with the themes of this exhibition (Quiroga & Pedreira 2011).

The word can also have a double meaning, in that a painting can be exquisite because of the craftsmanship that went into creating it so that it has an immensely moving or extremely beautiful nature. In the instance of the two comments, one referred to the paintings being of a luminous quality, which may speak to the way Siopis' technique and material resulted in scenes that are akin to neon lights shining. The other comment expressed that even their breath was taken away, which could mean that they were so impressed that this could be expressed in the same way we tend to ascribe physiological states to our feelings: "breath" gets taken away when we are overwhelmed with excitement, so much so that the brain sends those signals to the throat and lungs. Based on these two users' choice of words, the *Atlas* paintings are then revealed to have the capacity to be admired and to evoke people's feelings..

"Very special"

The comment that referred to the images as "very special" is a reminder for us to consider art from a personal perspective, because often it is treated too much as an element of public and cultural appreciation, which is also a valid experience to have. However, it can be about the one person staring at the painting and their internal world. In other words, every one object of art is unique in itself and every aesthetic or affective experience of a painting is subjective to each person. Therefore, the relationship between a painting's uniqueness and our subjective experiences of it is special to us – notable and memorable. According to Ellen Dissanayake (2003), special things are planned; there are efforts put into that planning.

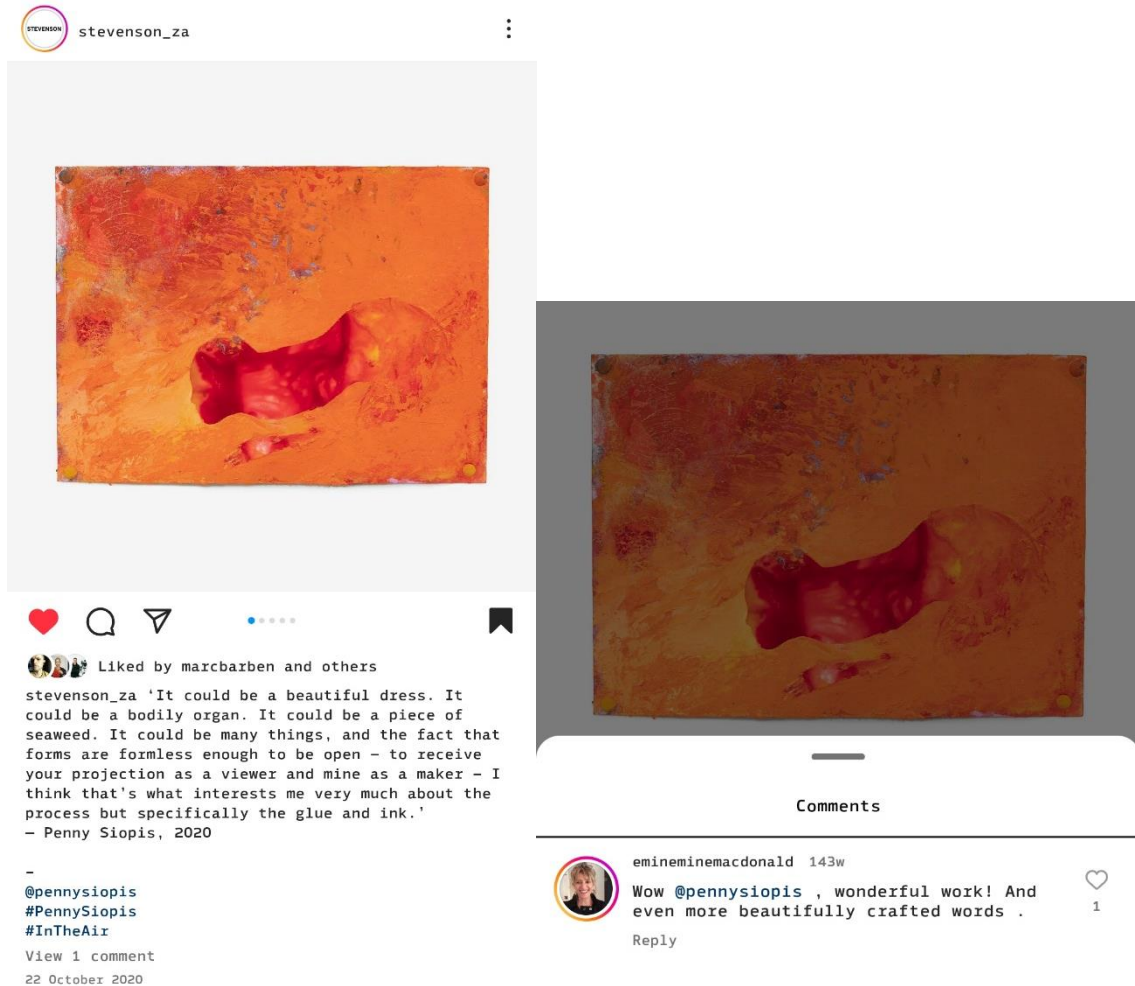


Figures 21: Instagram Post with three images and Comment 3, 2020, on Stevenson Gallery's In The Air exhibition's online promotion.

People have special places in which they engage in distinct activities (e.g., art galleries and museums for art appreciation). People wear special clothes to attend special events (e.g., an elegant dress or suit for an exhibition opening). People enter a special mood when they have to be around certain people or objects (e.g., becoming excited for an exhibition opening or mentally preparing for an art auction). They pay special attention on occasions that call for it (e.g., noticing significant/foregrounded elements in a painting that are most peculiar to oneself and evoke one's own feelings). Some may argue that to call something special is a vague comment to make but the word holds an incredible meaning when considered more deeply. People can consider their relationships with their mother or child very special; they can consider their memories to be special; they can find their first emotional connection to something very special. Therefore, also considering that a painting can be likened to a play (Dissanayake 2003), people can be reminded of real moments from their lives when they see the scenes presented through a painting and be moved to emotion, in similar ways as when they watch scenes unfolding on a theatre stage; they could relate to subjects in a painting as they would to the characters in a play.

“Wonderful words and even more beautifully crafted words”

Given the user who commented that “Wow @pennysiopis, wonderful work! And even more beautifully crafted words”, my attention was turned to how Siopis' use of words in in describing her work have a great sentiment and can be said to have some additional influence over the viewer becoming emotionally moved. As some research (Kearny 2013) has shown, it does take the artist's effort and expression of themselves through artist statements and interviews as well as curatorial essays and notes create the kind of space essential for an aesthetic and affective aesthetic experience for the viewers of art. This is further supported by instances whereby people are moved by the story of a play because of how the monologues or dialogues were written, how the stage was arranged, the execution of the scenes by the actors, and elements such as music.



Figures 22: Instagram Post with the five images (only one selected) and Comment 4, 2020, on Stevenson Gallery's *In The Air* exhibition's online promotion.

The behind-the-scenes factors of a show indeed play a significant role in the public's responses of that show, its scenes and characters, and so on. Admittedly, we need to hear more from people. We need art spaces that encourage more vocalisations of the emotional experiences that take form. Perhaps prompts are needed at the door (i.e., "How did this exhibition make you feel? Dig deep." signs). Until then, there have been some personal testimonies sent to art historian James Elkins (2005) through which we can have an indication of what the answers to such prompts could look like.

Letters to Elkins

In “a book about the ways that pictures can move us – strongly, unexpectedly, and even to tears” Elkins (2005: vi) are the written stories of different paintings and the people who cried because they were so moved by them. Although also revealing that there are people who have never and could never cry because of art, the book shows the possibility that there are groups of people in the world for whom it is highly possible to have a personal and emotional connection to the Atlas artworks of Siopis.

In all of the different ways people can express their thoughts and emotions with regards to art, we rely on people’s words to identify how a piece of art supposedly made them feel. Just as Elkins (2005) relied on the many letters people sent to him for his book, to understand the contexts behind their crying in front of the paintings they claimed to have cried in front of and to gather a better sense of the emotional experience of when people enter the affective sphere in the setting of an art gallery or museum. The letters that were sent to Elkins contained sentimental stories with remarks such as the following. It is to be noted that the people who wrote these letters were most likely looking for the best possible ways to explain that emotional event, not only for the sake of contributing to this book but also for themselves in trying to understand what happened in that past moment.

Letter 6: “looking at those paintings was terribly exciting and moving”;

Letter 15: “to me it seems that this is the real purpose of art: to attract you to your very self by breaking certain barriers (isn’t crying just a melting of the heart?), by way of a certain harmony”;

Letter 16: “suddenly I found myself crying, rather overwhelmed by intense sadness... the best [explanation] I could come up with (and I’m comfortable with my interpretation) is that the utter serenity and harmony of the painting so shockingly contrasted with my own inner turmoil that it became a devastating experience;

Letter 17: “I attribute my crying to the images reawakening the sadness I experienced for about two years on each occasion when two of my friends died”;

Letter 26: “It is the recognition of something similar, the experience of being part of it, and maybe even a feeling of grace, a moment of unforgettable happiness”;

Letter 32: “I was overcome by his emotive colour” (Elkins 2005: 181-196).

These are the kinds of stories that show us the various reasons people become emotional when faced with art. They reveal how paintings are capable of giving the viewer not only an aesthetic experience but one that is undeniably emotional, one that goes beyond pure and simple appreciation.

Letter number 32 mentioned the writer being overcome by the colours of the painting that made the writer cry. This falls in the same area of the aesthetic experience spectrum as the Instagram user who mentioned luminosity when responding to a few of the *Atlas* paintings. Red is a large part of the *Atlas* experience and red is extremely moving. It makes us think about blood and passion – the blood in our systems and the passion we have as individuals in our own spaces. Therefore, this statement makes us further consider Siopis' visualisations of emotion even more. I can come to some sort of understanding that the folds and layers of her paintings have the capacity to move people to such an affective aesthetic experience, to make them cry. Letters number 16 and 17 make us consider the already emotional states we are in when we enter art spaces. We enter art galleries with memories of past experiences that we then project onto the art. Throughout this research, you will see that Siopis has already given us the opportunity to see what we want when we look at the images from her work in this exhibition. The visual information we get is that there is a floating head, a gush of flames, or a scene from any of the other *Atlas* paintings. Yet, cognitively, there have been a number of emotions that people have felt that they associated with such scenes.

Elkins' book focused largely on crying as an expression of the emotional response to different aspects surrounding objects of art. For me, crying has always been one of the highest forms of expression for strong emotions. Tears are a very common in the expression of emotions such as sadness and hopelessness, more so than in the expression other emotions such joy and excitement. If someone claims to have been so overwhelmed by an event or object that they ended up crying, then we can understand them as having had a strong emotional experience. Therefore, I believe that experiencing a piece of art to the point that it makes one cry must have created a special emotional connection between the object and that person.

An Empirical Study

Markovic (2010) conducted a study titled *Aesthetic Experience and the Emotional Content of Paintings*. As per the abstract, the study was an exploration of “the relationship between aesthetic experience and other emotional qualities judged in paintings”. The first interesting element of the study was its concern with establishing what we mean when we speak of an aesthetic experience, which resulted in three characterisations of this experience. Firstly, when someone has an aesthetic experience, they have a distinct motivation and pay intense attention to an object; they lose all sense of all other objects and elements in the same environment, including themselves and their own bodies (as explained through the psycho-phenomenon of flow that was conceptualised by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi). Secondly, when someone has an aesthetic experience, their imagination and reliance on the semantics that they etch onto an object’s elements and symbols elevate that object beyond ordinary perception (for instance, seeing the isolation that trauma can create when looking at the figures of *Atlas* paintings that seem to be standing or walking alone). Thirdly, when a person has an aesthetic experience, it becomes an emotional moment, that they relate the object to themselves and then form a special unity with it (in this case, the unification would be seeing yourself walking alongside the figures that seem to be standing/walking alone or seeing the figures as your past self from a time you had to stand/walk alone).

Another element of interest was the way in which the research was performed and the results that were garnered from it because of that. Thirty-one psychology students in their undergraduate level of study were gathered to participate. Twenty-four paintings that are considered figural and semi-figural, which indeed represented a wide range of subject matters and themes, were chosen by the participants of a previous study. In turn, the students were shown images of the paintings over a projected screen and asked to judge the contents they were seeing in each painting by using words that were available to them, taking away words that were irrelevant, and adding their own words.

The study was psychology-focused and structured in a way that is more psychometric than the speculative mode of my research. The data from the study was quantified and a factor analysis

was employed to find the patterns in the participants' descriptions of the images of the paintings they were made to see and judge. The factors found in the study were "affective tone" (with descriptors such as: "lovely", "charming", "cheerful", "appealing", "irresistible", "I would like to have this painting", "scary", "disgusting", "hateful", "tragic", "sad", "pitiful", "disappointing", "angry") and "aesthetic experience" (with descriptors such as: "exceptional", "profound", "unique", "awing", "delightful", "fascinating", "eternal", "unspeakable"). The study relied on the words the students could use to describe the emotions that they were seeing in the images of the paintings and the emotions that they were feeling in relation to the paintings.

What the study realised was that participants' expressions of feelings were a distinct form of emotional responses that is to be differentiated from everyday emotions. This means that having particular feelings from viewing paintings that address environmental issues and attempt to make the audience understand the felt implications of that, like the *Atlas* paintings, is very different from the feelings one has when they are faced with the consequences of climate change and other conditions of their own life. Evidently, the objects of art are the creativity and artistic expressions of the artist, which we can then experience and be fascinated with.

The study also realised that paintings that would be considered either pleasing (i.e., evoking attraction) or displeasing (i.e., evoking aversion) can give the viewer an aesthetic experience. It is not only a matter of whether the characteristics or themes of the paintings have visually or narratively represented emotion for them to evoke someone's emotions. Finally, it was realised in the study that when it comes to art, an affective aesthetic experience constitutes hedonic emotions, rather than complex ordinary emotions. That is to say, the viewer is more likely to say that a painting is visually pleasing to look at or that they want to buy it; they would be less likely to say that a painting gives them a sense of trauma because the feeling of climate trauma has been visually or narratively represented by it.

Markovic (2010) used a psychometric tool to explore the study's hypotheses and ideas. In this way, participants were provided with words to describe the emotions they were expected to

feel when looking at the paintings they were being shown by the researchers. That is, if a painting had formal elements that could be judged as a clear portrayal of sadness, there were pre-existing descriptors “sad”, “tragic”. Or other such related terms they could choose from. Participants were not given the opportunity to choose the words from their own vocabulary to express what they may have been feeling or share what they thought would be the most appropriate feeling to have.

Yet, whether or not this factor of descriptors does not fully satisfy the ideas of a spontaneous affective aesthetic experience, the study does offer interesting insights into the emotional experiences people can have with paintings because of the varying factors that they focused on, which were mentioned in the previous sections. Those factors make us acknowledge the complexities of emotions as they relate to art and the emotional responses to or experiences of art. It is also fascinating that although it is primarily from the discipline of psychology, it can still be respected as /a worthy contribution art historical knowledge. I believe that an aesthetic experience of art that goes beyond mere hedonic pleasure or displeasure.

This study shows that art can indeed bring out a range of certain emotions from within us. Furthermore, with regards to my reading of Siopis’ *Atlas* paintings (that they are portrayals of emotions that is), as much as the affective aesthetic experience is grounded in subjectivity, the study’s method and participation reveals that there are elements that are common to us all. When we see the flames engulfing the figure in the painting from *Atlas II*, many of us will conclude that the figure is in a scorching heat, that has to represent a painful emotion because common sense ensures that we reckon no human in the world enjoy the time they spend in a state of psychological burning.

A Discourse of Emotion

In this section, I explore the individual and cultural elements of emotion. For this research to be fully nuanced, a discussion on the affective aesthetic experience beyond my individual reading of the *Atlas* paintings seems to be in order. Specifically, I want to offer an acknowledgement to the groups of people who may find laughter in burning or may not realise

the level of emotions that this research is dealing with. The topic at hand is affect and it is widely known that emotions are as dynamic and fluid as there are many cultures in the world. The discipline falls within art history and visual studies, which many people often have different or no connections to in the real world and outside of big art world cities such as Johannesburg or Cape Town, to name a few.

South Africa has a long and tragic history of racial and cultural divide as well as social injustices that has kept many people in their own worlds for the most part of history. As such, people of different ethnicities, which are often drawn in provincial lines, have their own knowledge systems, ways of understanding and being in the world. As stated in previous sections, many elements of humanity are common to us all. However, we have seen differences in how those have been socially and culturally interpreted, accepted, and expressed. In these differences, lies the question of where our racial and cultural backgrounds end and where our emotions begin. In other words, I was wondering about racial and cultural aspects of emotions, as a means to address the universalising people's emotional experiences.

Divya Tolia-Kelly (2017: 33) mentioned that not only South Africa but other societies as well are from a human history wherein "world cultures were framed [in ways that were underlined by] accounts of taxonomies of race where European bodies, affective capacities and sensibilities were defined as the best that humanity could achieve and offer". Those historical accounts universalised White European affective experiences and neglected the simple fact people coming from different racial and cultural backgrounds have had their own ways of life and, therefore, different emotional expressions in that life. That is not to say that people have different emotions. Emotions such as sadness and anger are common to everyone: the death of a loved one makes us all grieve, embarrassment makes us all feel shame, the thought of the end of our world and human mortality gives us all the emotions that are symptomatic of anxiety. It is the way we express these feelings that has relied mainly on cultural and individual aspects of our existence.

For instance, while Penny Siopis chooses red for the most part of exploring these intense emotional states and addressing negative changes of the natural world, another artist of a

different background could have chosen blue – another trusted symbol for sadness and addresses a similar theme through the natural element of water. The colour blue also makes an appearance in paintings 15, 19, 24, 39, and other paintings that were featured in this exhibition – in support of the subjectivity of emotional expressions, along with artistic representations of emotion.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

Conclusion with Sentiments and Future Considerations

The analysis of *Atlas I*'s fourteenth and *Atlas II*'s thirteenth paintings in Chapter 3 has provided some evidence for the idea that Penny Siopis has materialised emotion and visualised a state of feeling in the Atlas series. This materialisation and visualisation extends to her contemporary paintings, such as those of the *Shame* series, and the other paintings from the exhibition *In The Air*. Furthermore, the paintings demonstrate how theorisations of affect that this research is mainly and secondarily supported by apply in the portrayal of emotion, the process through which they were made, and possible experiences viewers can have with them.

The floating of the head and the fact that the subject is a bodiless head wherein the network of emotions takes place (Figure 17) as well as the torrentially flowing flames and that the subject is a full body engulfed by the streams of fire (Figure 18) demonstrate that affect is indeed an ongoing activity that is never truly off but simmers until it moves and bursts (Wetherell 2012). The paintings as a collective, each with a scene happening in its own world, prove affect as be visualised in a state of episodic performance; it is situated in time in its motion and combustion (Wetherell 2012) and thus could be captured by Siopis' artistry. The process of blind painting in which she created these paintings and integrated her life experiences and outlooks on the current state of the world exemplifies Dewey's notion that the root of art is in humanness (Goldblatt 2006). Specifically, the human flow of cognition and emotion. The red colour appearing in the form of liquids and stains in most of the *Atlas* paintings can remind us of blood. The idea of flames interacting with the body and the waxy texture in some of the imagery brings about thoughts of burning flesh. These thoughts are explained by Kristeva's theory of abjection, that viewing Atlas paintings, seeing their formal characteristics and then

potentially associating them with blood and flesh can invoke abject feelings whereby one is confronted with one's own sadness and anxieties in acknowledging their position and fragility in the topic of climate change (Georgelou 2014).

The affective element of viewer emotional expression, in the scope of this research, seems to be less considered based on the culture of a typical day at the art gallery or the browsing of virtual exhibitions or digital artwork presentations. The emotions often speculated by the art world (through general ideas such as that emotions are what art is about, that art is emotive, etc.) become compacted into words such as "moved", "mesmerised", "exquisite", "very special", and "beautiful work". Having explored what these words possibly mean and the cognitive-emotional dispositions from which they came, it is clear that the affective aesthetic experience can be summed up into what now ought to be referred as "much of the unsaid". It is not a general practice for art gallery or museum visitors to have the opportunity to share their aesthetic experiences with artists and art practitioners. Some discussions do take place in the context of specific occasions or initiative, such as exhibition walkabouts, art talks, or events such as Open Studios Joburg that are only a weekend long and take place annually. On a typical day, we walk into the art gallery, we engage with and admire the artworks on display, and exit with our thoughts and feelings about the experience.

Part of the culture has been to experience art on level that is personal and two-way interaction (e.g., the art exists and is emotive, the viewer experiences the art and has a number of emotions awakened within them). The second is the business element, wherein people admire art to the point where they buy and collect it. For one, institutions from different disciplines of society invest in art to not only benefit financially but to also to remain culturally aware of society (e.g., banks have been collecting art for ages). Another aspect, which is last but not least, is in academia (e.g., the history of art has been building the theoretical and practical knowledge we have and continue to grow on aesthetics and the aesthetic experience). A large gap has been identified, in which the affective aesthetic experience remains largely unspoken of and, therefore, unheard. At the very least not in the ways that were expected in this research. What was expected of this research was rich information on direct and explicit expressions of

situated affect, as per the facets that were covered in Chapter 3, which explored affect beneath and beyond the *Atlas I* and *Atlas II* paintings of Penny Siopis.

The first aim of this research was to explore the reading that Siopis' *Atlas* paintings contained within them characteristics that can be perceived as portrayals of different emotions. In the sections leading up to a formal analysis of selected paintings, painting number 14 from *Atlas I* and painting number 13 from *Atlas II*, from this body of work, there was discussion of Siopis' pre-*Atlas* artistic period. The historical paintings were explored mainly to support the idea that representational paintings are largely not discussed in the scope of affect theory, especially through the lens at which this theory was explored in this research. Because those paintings fell within the themes of politics and society and are realist in nature, their discourse remained on external factors. The *Shame* series acted as a bridging element of this research, because they were the turning point in Siopis' exploration of our internal worlds as people existing in society and experiencing the emotions that come with being. Seeing how viewers were moved by these works was a necessary segue into *Atlas*.

This study was able to make inferences of emotions in selected paintings from *Atlas I* and *Atlas II*, by analysing elements such as the shapes that appear and the colour red that is prominent throughout Siopis' abstract works. Through also engaging with other media such as the lyrics of an emotional pop song, a quote from the dialogue of an emotionally charged novel, and the scene from a historical drama film that explores emotions women often caught due to their circumstances, I was able to make comparisons with the visual compositions of the two paintings. Siopis' artistic interests in form and formlessness or the formlessness of forms as well as poetics of vulnerability are prominent in her paintings, and this provides significant insight into the deep emotions that could be inferred from the analysis in the *Atlas I* and *Atlas II* section of the third chapter. Non-clinical forms of depression and anxiety can be inferred from the paintings, with specifically emotions such as sadness, emotional pain, frustration, loneliness, and other such feelings being inferred from the solo floating red head as well as the solo walking body being consumed by a fire.

I found that the way Siopis speaks about her work, the process through which she created these pieces, and the language used by Stevenson Gallery to present the exhibition in which this *Atlas* series was first featured played a significant role in the visual story that viewers can indulge in when seeing all 57 paintings. The notions of affect are stark throughout this research. That is, affect as presented by Wetherell (2012) as a flowing activity of the mind that is situated in a single moment of time through various ways of expressing emotions (ever-moving and ever-present) and presented by Goldblatt (2006) as the core element of art through which both the artmaking process and the aesthetic experience are supposed to take place in a holistic way (an ever-connected humanness).

Once my reading of the paintings was demonstrated, the research aimed to discover the knowledge we can come into from exploring what the emotions portrayed in the *Atlas* paintings tell us about the ways in which art can be emotionally experienced and aimed to learn more about how affect in the scope of this research applies to the affective aesthetic experience, under the heading *The Affective Possibilities of Atlas*. Starting with random people's thoughts about and feelings towards presentations of the *Atlas* images on social media platform Instagram. The comments from Instagram users on Steven Gallery's posts to promote this body of work was received positively. People were amazed by the process and the words of penny Siopis. Although, much more could have been said. As stated at the beginning of these concluding remarks, the art world has not yet cultivated a sphere of rich emotional engagement. A point where many people can admit the exact emotions that were going through their mind in a direct kind of way has not been reached.

On the other hand, art historian and writer James Elkins (2005) has shown that such a point is indeed reachable. For his book, he asked a variety of people to share their experiences if they had ever cried in front of paintings through letters. The crying of people in front of paintings was an important element for this research because the letters that those people sent to Elkins (2006) revealed exactly how deep (in terms of having the emotion) and how deep (in terms of expressing the emotion) an affective aesthetic experience can go. Furthermore, the empirical study that was conducted by Markovic (2010), which can be said to be valuable to art history and visual studies through a lens of psychology, showed us that art, especially objects of art

that can be judged as having emotional qualities, has the capacity to be experienced through a wide range of emotions that are complex and not simply art appreciation or disapproval, pleasure or displeasure, and like versus dislike. An affective aesthetic experience wherein the viewer can describe feeling sad, pity, fear, disgust, awe, joy, and other kinds of emotions is a possibility.

Affect theorists such as Gibbs (2010) and Kristeva (Georgelou 2014) proposed emotional expressions such as mimetic communication which involves viewers engaging in the creative copying of subjects of the paintings that moved them as well as abject responses such as the blurring of the line between objecthood and subjecthood, wherein the subject is the viewer, which typically leads to identifying oneself strongly to the subject of the painting, losing one's own sense of self momentarily because the painting contains elements that carry corporeal characteristics (e.g., corpse imagery leading to the awakening of intense thoughts about the concept of death or the red in Siopis' *Shame* or *Atlas* series being associated with human blood or internal organs or systems). Yet, our understanding of the complexities of emotions calls to consideration the complexities that are to be expected in an affective aesthetic experience. It is possible that not everyone creates nor reacts to art in an emotional way. Therefore, the possible experiences of *Atlas* or any of Siopis' work will be open for future consideration. The important facet of this research was driving a discussion around Siopis' later works of art – the more abstract entries to her catalogue as an artist and taking a peek underneath the veil of affect theory in an art historical context to bring forth a new way of thinking about and engaging with art moving forward.

We are a generation that lives most of its life through the screens of the devices we have made part of our lives. Many of us discover our favourite artists through social media platforms such as Instagram and then find ourselves fascinated by their art, to the point whereby we decide to visit their exhibition. Although some instances make it impossible for someone to visit museums or art galleries, such as during the COVID-19 lockdowns that placed restrictions on public movement or when someone comes from a small town where there are no major nor formal/traditional art spaces.

In my personal experience, I found that there was a remarkable difference in seeing the painting *Melancholia* at the Johannesburg Art Gallery versus viewing images of it on my smartphone or computer. There is also the implication that one's mind prepares them when entering an art gallery or museum, because they are usually knowledgeable of the kinds of spaces about those institutions, what they entail, and how to conduct themselves. On the other hand, being on one's phone or computer does not require much etiquette and effort in comparison. Scrolling through images is an activity that I believe to be more contained than the average walk in an art space. However, with the rise of digital media engagement and the fact that this generation takes place online, this research found that many art galleries and museums were making the right efforts to bring a personal and emotional touch to digital aesthetic experiences.

Furthermore, I feel that we are even past the stages of debating about digital social media because that sphere has become part of our reality. We are presently faced with the wave of art created by artificial intelligence programs (AI). Of course, this makes sense as a follow-up thesis topic to this one: perhaps there are differences in how people respond to objects of art created by human beings versus these programs. Perhaps some argue that these programs were created by human beings to begin with and, as such, the art was created by a human and the programming aspect is merely a tool, in as much as a paintbrush is an artist's tool of creation. There is much to uncover and learn about art, with the direction that life is taking, as well as about the emotional quality and emotional experiences of art.

The people who sent Elkins (2005) the letters for his research as well as the artists who were respectively moved or mesmerised by Siopis' historical paintings experienced the paintings in the context of an art gallery or museum environment, as originals not as photographs. Apparently, there are "energies" in the exhibition space "that connect an exhibition to its beholder"; there is also a "lacuna – the arena of experience" that creates a sphere that exceeds regular thought and discussion and enables the viewer to be attuned to their surroundings so they can enter an affective interaction with the art (Fisher 2006: 27). In addition to the artist's creative flair, what an art gallery has is curators and art practitioners who work tirelessly to create what Fisher (2005: 28) refers to as "the affect of an exhibition", "its feeling". As much as platforms (e.g., Instagram, Twitter, Reddit, etc.) on which we can encounter art have

algorithms that automatically curate content based on people's interests, the feeling of being surrounded by art in a gallery as opposed to exploring art through a small screen is, in essence, very distinct.

My sentiment is that there is no art without emotion, even if the art is not portraying emotion. What we should then concern ourselves with is ensuring that, no matter where art practice goes and regardless of the environment in which art reaches an audience, there are measures continuously taken to maintain the personal and emotional elements. Stories such as that of art collector Makgati Molebatsi (Artsy Editorial Team 2020) about the nostalgic feelings that were brought on by a very important painting on the South African child's lived experience are the foundations and pillars of the art network.

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